

INDELIBLE *Journey*

"Real life in the contemporary world"



ASHISH KUMAR



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“Real Life In The Contemporary World”



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Ashish Kumar

1st Edition

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Publication Date: June 2023

Price: ₹ 298 \$ 15

ISBN: 978-93-5847-035-2

Published by:

Adhyyan Books

Office No. 125,

Opposite Vivanta by Taj,

DDA SFS, Pocket-1, Dwarka,

Sec-22, New Delhi-110077

Website: <http://adhyyanbooks.com>

E-mail: contact@adhyyanbooks.com

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Printed at: Repro Printers, Delhi



Dedicated to my wife, Prachi Raj

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is a fiction novel based on seemingly true events of life.

The fictitious plot, theme, and dialogues are merely the creation of the author, and the intention of this work is to provide an engaging and compelling account that captures the essence of life in the contemporary world.

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FOREWORD

Foreword from IAS Nitin Sangwan

I am sure this literary masterpiece will take readers on a delightful voyage through various phases of life, each one full of unexpected twists. With its captivating narrative and profound themes, "**Indelible Journey**" is a reminder that life can be unpredictable and challenging, but it's also full of hope and the potential for great things.

So, immerse yourself in the profound and intricate world of "Indelible Journey," a novel that offers a unique glimpse into the complexities of society. The author's masterful storytelling weaves together a rich tapestry of the current state of the world, vividly portraying the struggles and triumphs that people face every day.

Follow the characters as they navigate through life's challenges, facing unexpected obstacles that shatter their

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dreams and plans. The characters are relatable, and their experiences will leave a lasting impact on you.

Each page is filled with heart-pounding moments, taking you on a rollercoaster ride of emotions.

I wish everyone reading this book a happy time throughout the journey of life, and good luck to the author.

Let's dive into the "Indelible Journey" and discover the amazing characters and their stories together.

Good Luck!

**Bipin Menon, India Trade Service, Development
Commissioner, Noida SEZ**

I am pleased to share my experience of reading the debut novel by Ashish, "Indelible Journey: Real Life in the Contemporary World."

I started reading "Indelible Journey" at first, I thought it was just another work of fiction, but as I delved deeper into the story, I realised it was a raw and honest portrayal of the contemporary world. It depicts a world where unexpected events can upend our lives in an instant, leaving us struggling to find our footing.

It's an eye-opening read that really makes you reflect on the unpredictability of life.

I found "Indelible Journey" to be an incredibly engaging read. What sets this novel apart is its ability to capture the essence of human resilience. Despite facing difficult challenges, the characters in the book manage to persevere and find newfound strength and courage. This book is truly thought-provoking and reminds us of the power of perseverance in the face of adversity.

As I turned the pages further, I saw the world in a new light. I realised that the harsh truths depicted in the book represent society and are well-related to millions of people.

I was hooked by the story's emotional twists and turns, and some incidents even left me completely shocked. But amidst

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the turmoil, there were also beautiful moments of love, care, and endurance in the face of suffering. It's a book that will stay with you long after you've turned the last page, inspiring you to embrace the journey of life with all its surprises.

To conclude, "**Indelible Journey**" serves as a powerful reminder that life is full of events and that it's important to be ready to face anything that comes our way.

Best of luck!

Dr Shikha Joshi, MBBS, MD

I am glad to write a foreword for a novel, "**Indelible Journey: Real Life in the Contemporary World**," by Ashish. I am sure the readers will find much to take away from the glimpse of seemingly real life depicted in the work. Here is my experience in the form of a foreword:

Life is full of surprises and challenges that can test our resilience and ability to adapt. The beautiful and poignant book "Indelible Journey" serves as a powerful reminder that we must be ready to face whatever life throws our way. No matter what happens, we can navigate through these events with courage, strength, and grace.

From the first page, you will be drawn into the lives of the carefully crafted characters, each leaving their own unique mark on the world while sailing their Voyage of life. The story is full of twists and turns, keeping you on the edge of your seat and eager to know what happens next.

As you flip the pages, you will experience a range of emotions, from heart-wrenching sadness to pure joy.

The novel explores the depths of human emotion, leaving you with a sense of understanding and empathy for the characters and their struggles.

The Indelible Journey is a powerful reminder that life is a journey. It is a must-read for anyone who has ever loved, lost, or faced adversity.

I am sure this novel will leave an indelible mark on your own journey through life.

The best part of the novel is that it starts at the present time and ends fifteen years from now. It's a good depiction of the entire life of the character. I have never come across such a beautifully written journey through an unpredictable life.

Let's start the pleasant journey of human experience through an outstanding novel, Indelible Journey!

Thanks

Piyush Rohankar, DANCIS

Step into the world of **Indelible Journey**, where reality is a complex web of twists and turns that leave you mesmerized. This gripping work of fiction will take you on a journey through the ups and downs of life, showcasing the unpredictable nature of our world.

Its story resonates with everyone.

So, allow yourself to be fully immersed in this unforgettable adventure that is sure to leave a profound and lasting impression on your mind and heart.

All the best, Ashish!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am humbled and immensely grateful to acknowledge the incredible support and encouragement I received from so many people on my journey of writing and publishing my debut novel, **"Indelible Journey,"** through which I endeavour to reflect the contemporary world and all its raw and unbridled reality. From the deepest lows to the highest highs of life, this novel will take readers on an unforgettable journey that will leave them breathless with excitement and awe.

"Indelible Journey: Real Life in the Contemporary World" would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my friends, family, co-workers, and distinguished people whom I met on my journey of writing.

Working on "**Indelible Journey**" has been an incredibly fulfilling experience, and I am grateful to have had so many people in my corner.

I'd like to express my gratitude to the people who contributed their time and expertise to the screening of the manuscript, suggesting creative plots and characters. Your valuable insights and feedback have been invaluable in making this book what it is today.

I'd like to thank my friends Ashfak Alam, Nitin Shridhar, Sunaina Dubey, Abhimanyu Satyendra Yadav, Manmohan, Akhand, and Ankur.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to Ms. Srutimala (NTPC), Dr. Namrata Yadav (Medical Officer, CG), IRS Varun Kumar Singh, Mr. Ashley D'souza, Dr. Shikha Joshi, and Poonam Kumari for their unwavering support and suggestions for creative characters throughout the manuscript screening process.

I am grateful to IAS Nitin Sangwan, ITS Bipin Menon, DANCIS Piyush Rohankar, Dr. Shikha Joshi, MBBS, MD, and Xie Yu for reviewing the manuscript and writing a foreword.

I would like to express my gratitude to other authors, including Ms. Rajani Kafaltia (author of *Women Chin Up & Fix Yourself*), Nilanjana Chatterjee (author of *The Stolen Kiss*), and Vinit K. Silaniya (author of *I Wish I Could Hear*

My Name), whom I met along the way, for their assistance in finalising the cover page and suggesting the plot of the story.

I'm thankful for my fantastic team at Adhyyan Books, an international publishing company that helped me throughout the entire publishing process. Without their support and guidance, getting our books to market would have been very difficult. Their expertise and encouragement gave me the confidence to believe in and make our work a reality.

I am highly obliged to Mrs. Pooja Miglani for proofreading the final manuscript.

Also, I am grateful to the entire management of the company I am employed with, who supported and permitted me to publish this work. Without their assistance, this project wouldn't have been possible.

I'll always be thankful to my late mother (Mrs. Sangita Devi). Her unwavering belief in me has always inspired me to write. Though she is no longer by my side, her presence lingers in the gentle whispers of the wind, guiding me throughout my journey through life.

I am always thankful to my father (Mr. Shri Prakash), he is the unwavering rock upon which my foundation was built. His faith in me has been a beacon of light during the darkest of nights.

Highly grateful to my dear wife for her extraordinary presence in my life and the profound impact she had on this

novel. Without her unwavering inspiration, completing the journey of writing would have been an arduous task.

Last but not the least, I am thankful to all my siblings, son, nephew, niece, and friends who have been always stood by me unconditionally at all times.

"Indelible Journey" is a novel that brings seemingly true events to life through the magic of fiction. It will capture the hearts of millions of people worldwide. The real-life happenings within its pages resonate deeply and personally with readers. The book motivates readers to keep going, no matter their obstacles, by showing them experiences ranging from heartache and loss to triumph and joy.

I wish everyone reading this book a happy time throughout the journey of life. I hope that the characters' journeys in this novel will inspire others to persevere and reach their aspirations. Let's dive into the world of **"Indelible Journey"** and discover the amazing characters and their stories of real life together.

Thanking you,

Ashish Kumar

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"Let's embark on the journey and experience it, bearing in mind that the journey of real life is always unpredictable, full of peaks and valleys, highs and lows, yet we make it an indelible journey."

08 February 2021

CHAPTER -I

Sound of honk, honk, honk..... continued blaring...

Nitish drove his white Creta Car and honked at the silver Ertiga Car in front of him.

The honking sound echoed on the highway.

It was NH-8, Delhi-Jaipur highway, one of the busiest highways connecting Gurgaon to Delhi and Jaipur.

There was no congestion, but Nitish observed vehicles rushing along after looking in the rear-view mirror, so he didn't change the lane.

It was a light foggy morning on February 8, 2021. The sun hadn't been coming out of the clouds for the last three days, diminishing visibility to 30-40 metres. It had been appearing in the afternoon. Today followed a similar pattern to earlier winter days.

Besides closely tailing the Ertiga, Nitish flashed his headlights while maintaining a safe distance and patience.

"Foolish Driver," Nitish muttered as he was stuck behind.

Nitish used the car's Bluetooth every day to make morning calls right after taking his car out of the basement parking lot.

As he drove to the office, Nitish spoke to his friend Aditya using Car's Bluetooth. It was 9:20 am.

Nitish had three alternatives while driving to the office: get frustrated with traffic, play music, or call a friend. He found calling a friend an excellent way to socialise and keep his mind engaged during the frustrating traffic of the National Capital Region (NCR).

During their usual conversation, Nitish asked Aditya, "Are you coming to the office today?"

As Aditya prepared to begin his workday from home, he replied, "Nitish, my wife asked me last night if it was necessary to go to the office tomorrow." I told her, "If you prefer me not to go, I can work from home." *(Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the office operated at 50% capacity.)*

"I won't be coming to the office. We have planned to see a doctor."

"Wow! You are such an obedient husband." Nitish said with a smile.

Aditya said, "Yes, that I am."

"Oh! I only made a light-hearted comment," Nitish replied.

The two buddies continued their conversation about work, family, and life.

Nitish lived in a high-rise DLF apartment in Sector 83 of Gurgaon for its tranquillity and modern amenities, including security, a swimming pool, a clubhouse, a kids' area, and a decent park.

It was a mid- to high-income group housing society.

Although his home life was pleasant, Nitish's daily commute was always a nightmare, as it was common for people in Delhi and the surrounding NCR to frequently be stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Nitish was married to a lovely woman, and they had two pretty daughters. He led project teams for a multinational corporation in Gurgaon, India. He was dynamic and humble and hit the gym on weekends to stay in shape. Despite his average 5-foot-5 height, he impressed everyone with his quick response time. Nitish liked to break the ice with jokes and valued humanity above anything else.

Nitish always took a rational approach to his work. He learned people can walk away from their words at any time, so he liked documenting everything necessary.

While driving at a pace of 20 KMPH, Nitish prayed to God, "Please bless people with a sense of driving and create a space."

Nitish waited for a moment, then blew the horn loudly. "Honk....."

He grew impatient and gestured to the driver, hoping he would notice and let him pass.

"Oh, finally!" Nitish exclaimed as the driver of the Ertiga saw him in his rear-view mirror and moved to the left.

Nitish overtook the car and stared at the driver. But the next moment, he got fired as soon as he saw the driver on the video chat.

His frustration with the other driver handling a video call boiled over, and he shouted, "Foolish driver! Do your daily chores in the car, including eating and sleeping, and wait for an accident!"

Aditya heard Nitish's frustrated reactions over the phone. He laughed but also requested, "Hey, do not curse so much to a poor driver."

Nitish was driving and could do nothing more than mumble to cool his frustration.

And then, he put on an intimidating driving style, revving the engine with a loud "Vroooooooooom...".

While driving to the office, Nitish discussed his work-related issues with Aditya. At the same time, Aditya reviewed his work emails and messages and also chatted.

Aditya asked, "Will it be a relaxing day?"

"Nope, we have several tasks lined up for the day, so we won't have time for lunch even," Nitish replied.

"Okay," Aditya said.

Nitish's morning commute often felt like a war zone, with constant honking, passing, and aggressive driving. He discovered that talking on the phone was the best way to make his drive enjoyable.

It usually took Nitish 45 minutes to an hour to reach his workplace, Springs Plaza, from his home in Sector 83, Gurgaon.

Nitish had a fire inside to complete his projects, and he always stayed in his role, whether at the office, with friends, on the phone, or at home. He set clear agendas and deadlines and worked tirelessly towards them.

He used to be so involved in his role that he even treated regular household chores as projects, trying to finish them as quickly as possible instead of enjoying the work.

All of a sudden, Aditya interrupted Nitish and blurted out, "Nitish, it's an emergency with my wife. I'll call you later."

As Nitish drove, he could hear Aditya's son, Aarav, whispering something in the background, but he couldn't make out what it was.

Aditya disconnected the call abruptly!

Nitish wondered what Aditya had rushed off to do.

As the car sped off, Nitish couldn't shake off the feeling of concern that had gripped him after hearing the word "emergency."

Nitish remained at the wheel, wondering what had happened.

Despite his habit of calling his colleagues each morning, he decided not to reach out to anyone and continued driving to the office.

After waiting about five minutes for a call-back, Nitish grew increasingly curious, and he could not hold himself back. He tried calling Aditya, but there was no answer from his end.

Nitish waited for some time and called Aditya again, intending to scold him. He thought to ask him, "Don't you know the basic etiquette of answering the phone? If you told me, it was an emergency, you owe to explain what happened." However, even now, Aditya did not answer the phone.

After waiting for fifteen minutes, Nitish called again, but this time, the IVR message announced, "The person you are calling is busy on another call; please wait or try again later."

As Nitish continued driving to work, he couldn't help but think about what might have happened to Aditya and his family. His curiosity and concern remained high.

Finally, Nitish reached Springs Plaza, a twenty-one-story corporate tower in Sector 54, Gurgaon.

The tower had a bluish-glazing exterior and houses many global corporations. A massive logo of a cellular company visible from miles away made it easily recognisable as a landmark.

Nitish breathed a sigh of relief as he manoeuvred his car around the parking lot. As he deboarded the car, a parking attendant approached him and asked, "Sir, could you please move your car a bit to the left to make more room for the next car?"

Nitish replied, "No, it's parked perfectly."

The parking attendant insisted and said, "Please shift your car!"

Nitish angrily replied, "You should have asked me before I turned off the car!"

After a brief argument, the parking attendant relented and said, "Okay, never mind. You can leave it."

Feeling irritated after a brief argument, Nitish headed for the office building's porch. Also, the parking attendant walked along to his portacabin just behind him.

Seeing him back, Nitish asked, "Why did you want me to move the car when there wasn't enough space?"

"Are you habitual of asking the people to shift the car slightly?"

The attendant grinned and replied, "Well, sir, people come to work in the tower, and when they get bored and want to refresh themselves, they chat and take coffee or tea breaks to fix themselves."

Nitish asked curiously, "What's unique about that?"

The parking attendant replied, "Sir, how do I spend the entire day sitting in my portacabin without speaking to anyone?"

The parking attendant's response caught Nitish off guard.

"What do you mean?" Nitish was puzzled and asked, "Oh! So, you ran to me and debated for entertainment?"

The attendant grinned.

Nitish smiled at the attendant but felt irritated, knowing why he argued.

Next, he stepped off the porch and headed towards the elevator lobby, still smiling as he recalled his exchange with the parking attendant.

The lobby connecting the two entrances of the building was grand. Its flooring was made of off-white and black granite, which looked stunning. But the real showstopper was the

magnificent white chandelier that hung from the ceiling, adding to the grandeur of the interior. Right in the middle of the lobby was an escalator for the second floor.

The Ajanta cave design on one side of the wall and the MF Hussain painting on the other side gave the lobby a mix of modern and traditional aesthetics. The warm yellow lighting and well-maintained cool ambient made the lobby pleasant.

Nitish redialed Aditya's number, and to his surprise, he picked up amidst the wailing Ambulance and the announcement to make way for the Ambulance. The background noise also included a constant buzz of traffic and honking. Nitish got shocked, as he could not judge the situation!

He was puzzled and asked questions. He asked, "Hello, Aditya. What happened? Is everything okay? Can you hear me? Aditya, are you there?"

"Please response! Aditya. What happened? Where are you? Is everything alright on your end?"

But Aditya remained silent. He said nothing, and the call abruptly ended.

Nitish's face turned red as he heard the wailing of an ambulance but no voice. He grew increasingly frustrated as he moved toward the elevator.

He tried calling Aditya's number once more, but it remained unanswered.

Just then, another thought puzzled him: "Did Aditya say something that I couldn't understand because of the noisy surroundings?"

Countless confusion ran through his mind as he tried to judge, "If it was his ambulance or if another ambulance was passing him by."

"Why was there no response?"

Nitish's confusion was visible as he tried to figure out what could happen. He reached the elevator lobby and waited for the lift to arrive.

The morning rush to reach the floors was like the other days. Long waits for the elevator were a common issue.

There were three passenger lifts serving floors 1–21, plus an additional lift for use by maintenance staff on the building's rear side. Once, these lifts also served the three levels of basement parking when demand was lower. Now, from the ground floor, one can access the three levels of underground parking through different lifts.

"Hi, Nitish," Nitish heard a voice from behind. As he turned, he saw Naina.

Naina made her way towards Nitish with a bright smile on her face.

Naina stood 5'5" tall and had long black hair that framed her face perfectly. A glint of a white stone nose pin and golden

round earrings enhanced her graceful appearance. She was a street-smart young woman with a fair complexion. She knew how to get things done in every situation and wasn't afraid of obstacles that might come her way.

Naina had an outstanding personality. She was a blend of modern and traditional values. Even though she was married into a traditional family, she still kept up with her modern way of living.

Naina grew up in Faridabad with her two older brothers, who were always protective of her, even into adulthood and the time leading up to her wedding.

She would often plead with her mother, "Please get me married. I want to get rid of these guards." "Save me from these guards." This was her typical response throughout adulthood whenever she became frustrated with her brother's possessive attitude.

Naina completed her graduate studies in management at a college in the NCR. She was skilled in communicating with people from all sorts of backgrounds. She was quick-witted and positive.

Despite hurrying, Naina made it to Nitish in the bustling lift lobby.

She was a bold and outspoken girl, but her colleagues and friends noticed her behaviour erratically when receiving certain phone calls. She furrowed her forehead and became

agitated, either ignoring the call or responding, "I'm busy. Let me call you back."

Despite her changing demeanour, she maintained a fixed smile and had yet to disclose the root of her distress.

When asked what bothered her, Naina often responded dismissively, "It's nothing, just like that."

However, she was heard talking to someone and saying, "People are so nosy and keep bringing up silly issues."

"Had this call come from anyone she didn't know, she would have already blocked numbers." Instead, she seemed to be in a position where she couldn't even block numbers but ignored the call, anyway."

Was she the victim of "Digital Encroachment," an emerging but unrecognised form of infringement in which close friends and family members invade the private spheres virtually?"

In her current role, Naina worked on challenging projects for various government clients under Nitish's supervision.

Though rushed, she acted hastily and encountered Nitish in the lift lobby.

"Hi, how are you?" Nitish replied as they waited for a lift in the ground-floor lobby.

Naina noticed he appeared tense and asked, "Hey, what happened? You look anxious, Nitish."

He told Naina about his conversation with Aditya half an hour ago and also what he had just overheard on a call.

She reassured him, "Don't worry. He'll call you back soon."

While waiting for the lift, Nitish asked, "How are you?"

Naina replied, "I am fine."

She winced and pressed her forehead as if she had a headache. Nitish asked again, "Hey, what's wrong, Naina? Are you okay?"

Naina nodded and replied, "It's nothing, just a migraine." "If the pain persists, I might have to take a short leave."

Nitish became curious and asked, "Who played loud music in the morning?"

She replied, "The problem with living near the office is that getting an Ola or Uber is tough, and they often cancel the ride. So, I end up getting late for work."

As they entered the lift, Nitish said, "I see."

Their conversation continued.

"So, I took an auto today to save myself from being late," Naina said as they stepped out of the elevator.

Nitish said, "Hmm."

Naina continued, "The auto driver honked a lot."

Nitish asked, "Did you try to get him to stop honking?"

Naina replied, "I told him, 'Bhaiya, don't blare.'" But the auto driver countered, "Didi, they don't listen."

"If the other drivers are deaf, honking long won't make a difference." I told the driver in response.

"The auto driver said to me, okay, and two minutes later, the driver again blew the horn."

"And he continued long honking out of his habit. It seems no one teaches them when and how long to honk."

"It feels like they vent their frustrations through the vehicle horn."

Nitish exclaimed, "Okay, so a honk triggered your migraine today." "It is too bad!"

"Yes!" Naina replied.

While Naina and Nitish walked towards the office entrance, Naina noticed, "You seemed lost for some time, Nitish."

"Is something on your mind, Nitish?"

Nitish shook his head. "It's nothing."

"You look anxious, Nitish." "Tell me if you can share it," Naina asked again.

While walking, Nitish told Naina what he exactly heard on the phone, "In the first call, he said it was an emergency with his wife. In the second call, I could hear the sound of an

ambulance siren and the plea to clear the way amidst the traffic."

Naina said, "Maybe the sound of the Ambulance would be coming from the car next to him or somewhere near his vehicle. Perhaps his car window would be open."

Nitish nodded and said, "Maybe."

Nitish refrained from saying, "Aditya called me last night and said he won't be able to come to the office as he had to visit a doctor." "And now he is in an Ambulance."

Naina reassured him while walking in the corridor, "Let Aditya take the call, and you'll find that everything is fine with him."

The corridors on each floor had central air conditioning. It had light brown granite tiles, yellow walls, and also two emergency exit stairs at the opposite end. Additionally, fire alarms and extinguishers were installed on each floor.

As cameras did not monitor the stairs, it had become a location for personal meetings where individuals could discuss their frustrations with work and management and even gossip about peers.

Meanwhile, they heard a voice from the emergency exit stairs, "Hello!"

This was Ankit.

They smiled, and instead of shaking hands, they energetically tapped each other's elbows. This was their way of greeting.

Ankit worked in marketing and was a devoted follower of Guru Ji Maharaj and a voracious foodie.

Guru Ji was revered by his followers as a god with extraordinary powers. In fact, his powers were so remarkable that even atheists were drawn to him and became his devotees. His devout followers could be found all over the world, including at this workplace. Come what may in life, he always remembered Guru Ji and took the challenges upfront.

Ankit was of a slight build and slightly shorter than the average Indian male, standing at 5'4". He was naturally cheerful, always sporting a broad smile that drew people to him. At 40 years of age, he had retained 90% of his hair, but 40% had turned white. He dyed his hair to appear younger than his age.

Ankit's unique ways of motivating himself had stuck with Naina ever since they first met. She often recalled and chuckled at his method. Once, Naina asked Ankit, "How do you manage to stay positive all the time?"

Ankit gave a memorable response that Naina used to inspire those she cared about. He said, "Naina, when I get up in the morning, the first thing I imagine is a tasty breakfast. Then I prepare for the office and take the same."

"While commuting to work, I think about what I might eat for lunch."

In continuation, Ankit said, "Around noon, I check my tiffin, and if I don't find my lunch as desired, I order from Zomato or Swiggy. Since I cannot return my full tiffin, I offer it to someone who may need it, or I feed it to a pet on my way home."

Naina grabbed her stomach with a guffaw and said, "Stop, Ankit." "I can't take any more; it's too much."

Ankit laughed and continued, "On my way home, I stop at metro stations like Rajiv Chowk to have my supper."

"I never forget to eat what I plan to, no matter the season."

Naina laughed and said, "Ankit, patent your unique way of self-motivation!"

With a chuckle, Ankit replied, "Yes, sure!"

Nitish, Naina, and Ankit walked into the office and signed in using the biometric reader.

The day in the office started just like any other day.

CHAPTER - II

The office buzzed with activities as the day began.

Phones and intercoms rang constantly, keyboards clicked rapidly, and Skype / Zoom calls mixed to make a lot of noise. The printers hummed loudly, and co-workers chatted casually while doing their work.

Meetings and conversations between departments contributed to the chaos that filled the atmosphere.

Amidst all this commotion, a sweet lime scent wafted through the air. It was a welcome respite from the sensory overload of the office. However, the relief was short-lived, as the loud hum of the air conditioning duct soon became a source of irritation.

Naina took a call from an angry client complaining about the delay in the project. She reached out to Nitish and handed over the call.

Nitish wasted no time in taking charge of the situation. He answered the call and quickly reassured them, "Don't worry, sir, the consignments will arrive in just three to four days. They have already left the port, and we are working hard to ensure we complete the project as scheduled."

Nitish explained to the client, "Sir, following recent regulations passed by the Government, the customs clearance process took longer than usual, and they quarantined the containers for an additional twenty days to prevent the spread of COVID."

"Sir, okay, will depute enough manpower in the coming week." "Sure, sure, yes, noted sir," Nitish responded.

The customer appeared satisfied, and the call ended.

Nitish replied several emails, took colourful notes, and stuck them to the board. He documented everything important in his notebook and updated the client and team on various fronts. He had some meetings later in the day.

Ankit was in the conference room giving a presentation to a business partner who had stopped by during his business trip. The client had been here since morning.

Ankit was known for his outstanding logical thinking skills. He never minds speaking frankly, even if others might not agree with his thoughts.

Amidst the daily grind, Naina reached out to Nitish once again and found him lost. She inquired, "Have you spoken to Aditya yet?"

Nitish replied, "I could not reach him on his phone."

Nitish checked the time on his desk clock: "It is eleven o'clock."

Just then, another thought popped up in Naina's mind, and she said, "Perhaps he would be experiencing network issues; there's no need to worry."

Nitish said, "Yup, I feel so." and he turned back to his computer.

While Naina returned to her seat, leaving Nitish alone in the cabin.

Nitish struggled to concentrate and grew increasingly anxious as he waited for Aditya to return his call.

He remembered something Aditya often said when he was tired of commuting. He reflected on what Aditya mentioned, "It's impossible to be happy in today's society."

Aditya further added, "People advised owning a home, but the idea of owning a home seemed pathetic for people working in the private sector in the NCR, yet people

desperately bought homes. However, the principle of renting a house close to the workplace was wiser."

Nitish, lost in thought, remembered Aditya, "He lived in Greater Noida and commuted to work in Gurugram. He had been travelling for the past four years. He lived with his wife and son. Aditya, Prisha, and their adorable son (Aarav) made a lovely and small family together."

"Aditya was a cheerful and positive man who always saw the silver lining, no matter how tough things got. Standing at 5'7", with a fair complexion and an average build, he had an impressive personality."

"He was a marketing professional with an MBA from a top-tier university and had extensive professional experience. He was incredibly organised and efficient, which made him the perfect fit for handling key accounts for his company. Aditya was always grateful for the love and support of his stunning wife, Prisha."

Nitish's mind wandered into the past, and a series of thoughts flooded his mind about Prisha, "When I last met Prisha, she looked a stunning young lady who stood tall at 5 feet 5 inches with a fair complexion and a beautiful round face adorned with a light mole on her left cheek. Her sweet voice was music to the ears, and when she laughed, two dimples graced her lovely face. But her beauty was more than skin-deep, as she possessed a pure heart."

"Prisha was a lifelong learner, having earned her bachelor's degree before marriage. She pursued a Bachelor of Education degree as well as acquired multiple yoga diplomas in NCR after her marriage."

"She was an ambitious woman who taught English and Yoga at the reputed school in Greater Noida alongside her regular duties as a teacher."

"Passionate about yoga, Prisha practised it daily. She was always mindful of her public image, had a keen sense of fashion, and maintained a high attitude."

"Prisha embodied the spirit of a free bird."

"Prisha highly valued time and punctuality. She often repeated her favourite saying, 'Don't waste your time,' to those around her multiple times a day."

Nitish remembered Aditya shared with me what he often told Prisha, "I can spend my whole life just seeing in your eyes, Prisha."

Nitish strolled around the cafeteria while waiting for a call back from Aditya, and he was lost in thought.

The aroma of coffee wafted through the cafeteria.

The office cafeteria had everything a good in-house cafeteria should have. It had a refrigerator, microwave, hot water dispenser, and coffee maker for cappuccino, milk, water, and tomato soup.

A round white light hanging from the ceiling enhanced the cafeteria's modern vibe. The red chairs and rectangular table completed the look. Besides sitting at a table with chairs, guests could use the hydraulic lifts to raise the chairs to waist level and stand at the table's corners. This layout gave the cafeteria a modern feel.

The golden sunlight filtered through the windows. Despite the chilly weather outside, the sun's rays warmed Nitish.

While waiting for Aditya to call back, Nitish recalled their conversation from the previous night. "He mentioned the name of some medicines and asked, 'Do you know these medicines?'"

"He also mentioned that he had tried to contact a doctor the previous evening, but since it was Sunday, the doctor was not available. However, he had to go to see the doctor today."

By now, Nitish had a feeling that everything was not okay with Aditya. But he was unaware of the details. He had been waiting anxiously for Aditya's call.

He also remembered his morning call to Aditya when he had asked, "Is everything okay? Are you alright? What happened?" But there was no response.

He further pondered, "Did he say something I missed because of an ambulance sound and background noise?"

Or

"He didn't say anything."

Nitish was trying to relax by taking a stroll through the cafeteria, but he couldn't stop thinking about the possibility that something terrible might happen.

Just then, Naina looked for Nitish in his cabin.

She did not find him there and reached the cafeteria, where she spotted him.

She said, "Hello, Nitish." "I was looking for you to discuss some issues."

Nitish said nothing in response but nodded. His face was expressionless because of the assumed uncertainty at the end of Aditya.

Seeing that Nitish was upset, Naina also remained silent and stood by him.

She realised that since neither Nitish nor Aditya had any close family living in the NCR nor friends who could provide emergency help, they had developed a good bond in their four years of working together. They would have cherished all the good times they had spent together.

To ease Nitish's anxiety, Naina thought of relating the current situation of medical uncertainty with the life of her elder brother to maintain a positive attitude.

"Nitish, Aditya's wife, is going to be fine," Naina reassured him. "I will tell you an example of an incident about how

people fight for their lives and survive in difficult conditions."

Naina continued, "During the Sun Festival of 2019, my brother (Piyush) was on a business trip to Goa. He suddenly developed cervical issues. He saw a doctor on the spot and headed back home."

"I have two older brothers. They are married and have small kids."

Piyush was three years older than Naina. He was a B. Tech. in mechanical and handled marketing for a Japanese multinational corporation. He travelled extensively to many countries. Piyush, who was around 32, had an average-built body and stood at 5'7".

He had fair skin, deep black eyes, thick black hair, and a dashing appearance. Known for his great sense of humour, he had a beautiful wife and a 5-year-old son who had supported him through everything. Piyush's life was exciting, and he was content with everything he had.

Nitish nodded and said, "Okay."

Naina continued, "In the next few days, Piyush began regurgitating everything he ate and drank, aside from his cervical problems. We thought it might be jet lag or food poisoning since he had just returned from a business trip."

"He took standard precautions when sick with fever and vomiting because of an infection and continued his medication as per the doctor's prescription."

"Later, he had the doctor-recommended blood profiling and routine health investigations, but the results showed no cause for alarm, yet his fever kept fluctuating."

Nitish nodded and said, "Okay."

Naina continued, "My older sibling and I took Piyush to the hospital to have various tests run all day."

"The doctors were also perplexed as his test results showed no signs of any serious disease or virus."

"Meanwhile, we observed the rapid weight loss that prompted us to rush him to the city's best hospital. By then, it would be March 2020. The COVID had spread, and the government had ordered a lockdown in the country."

Nitish thought to himself, "Naina's emotional whirlwind is revealing something big." And he remained attentive.

Naina continued, "My older sibling went to the biggest hospital in the town with Piyush to have various tests again, including a CT Scan of the whole body and various blood profiling."

"Here, initial tests revealed some irregularities, and they referred the case to Oncologists for confirmation."

"A day later, they performed further tests under the supervision of a team of Oncologists."

"Around 5 pm that evening, my older brother informed me over the phone, 'A team of Oncologists would confirm their preliminary findings and recommend treatments.'"

My brother requested me, "Please come to the hospital. I am afraid, Naina."

Nitish nodded and asked, "What did you do then?" "The entire country was under lockdown during those months of the year."

Naina replied, "I asked my brother, 'Can I come tomorrow since my husband is unavailable? Also, there is a curfew imposed here.'"

After hearing this, my brother said, "Yes, please reach out today, if possible, Naina," and then abruptly hung up.

"I called back and said, 'Brother, let me call my husband and try to reach the hospital.'"

Naina continued, "My husband arranged a pass from the local authorities. And we reached the hospital. We navigated towards the room where Piyush was admitted. I was also afraid, knowing it could be the worst case, but I held myself and met my eldest brother out of the room where Piyush was admitted."

"My eldest brother's eyes welled up with tears when he saw me, and he could not stop them."

"Patting on his back, I asked, "What happened, Bhaiya (Brother)?"

"My eldest brother did not stop crying, as if he had been waiting for me to share his grief for many hours. He kept crying. I repeatedly asked, "Please tell me, where is Piyush?"

"Please tell me, how is he?" "What happened?"

I handed a glass of water to my brother.

"After a moment, he spoke in a distressed tone, 'Piyush has been diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia (ALL), a type of Blood Cancer in the third stage.'"

Tears rolled down Naina's face as she talked about the incident with Nitish, and she paused.

Nitish exclaimed, "Oh! Cancer in the third stage at the age of 32? Life is unpredictable."

Naina added, "It's one of the most dangerous types of blood cancer."

"Although I tried to be calm with a smiling face, I cried. I cried relentlessly, listening to my brother." Naina was filled with emotion while explaining the incident.

"That day, I vowed I'd not cry, and I'd support him in fighting the deadly disease."

"I thought I was the most courageous in my family. If I give up, who will support him?"

Naina said with a heavy heart, "My brother, husband, and I entered Piyush's room and found him lying on the bed, connected to many wires. Seeing him in that state was difficult, but we had to be strong."

"I told Piyush, 'Don't worry, brother, you will get through this.'"

"I am here for you. You promise me you will not think negatively about anything."

"Trust God, Piyush!"

"Wonderful Naina," Nitish praised. "You did a good job, Naina."

Naina smiled & took a pause, and she continued, "After some days, Piyush was in extreme pain as his condition got even worse after some days."

"We only had our faith in God. We believed my brother would survive."

Naina continued, "Despite his sufferings and pains, his family continued to be a source of unwavering support."

"Piyush, during treatment, went through many hopeless times and kept crying and asking the parents, 'What about the second thought for my wife?' 'Because he cared about the happy family he had.'"

Nitish nodded and agreed, "Yea, terrible time for a young man."

Naina shared, "I heard Piyush's plea and yelled as loudly as possible, "There is only one choice, Piyush! You will recover, and we will have a wonderful life together."

"I will give you a second choice, 'You will recover and live your life.'"

And for the third option, "You will return home happily."

I yelled and asked Piyush, "Brother, do you need more options now?" I kept asking, "Please tell me. I need to know."

I begged him, "Piyush, don't lose hope. Trust that you will be okay. Believe that the family you have built will be happy with you."

Nitish interrupted and said, "Piyush's concern for his wife was genuine. His love was truly remarkable."

Naina nodded in agreement and added, "It was heart-breaking to see him suffer, but his love and concern for his family never faded."

"Piyush went through surgery for his Cancer and endured chemotherapy. He did this with a strong willingness and conviction that he would recover. Despite the pain, he went through everything."

Nitish asked, "Good, Brave Piyush. Where is he now?"

Naina continued, "Piyush is now living with regular medication and dialysis. He is a true warrior and fought against the disease with all his might. And yes, the entire family stood by him and supported him throughout his battle."

Naina then reassured Nitish, "Nothing will happen to Aditya or Aditya's wife. He'll call you soon; everyone does what they can to stay alive."

"Trust me, Nitish!"

Nitish sighed in relief and said, "I also hope it's just a network issue, or maybe he's busy at the hospital and couldn't call me. He would be with his family, and I shouldn't intrude on his personal life."

Naina reassured him, "He will call you soon. Don't worry."

As Nitish's anxiety subsided, he expressed gratitude for Naina's words of encouragement.

After a moment of silence, Nitish explained, "Naina, I have never heard Aditya in a hysterical tone before, but this time, he sounded panicked when he heard from his son. He has no one to take care of his son in the city. His close relatives live in a different city, and his immediate family is from another city."

Naina joined the company a year ago, a few months before the COVID lockdown began, so she was not aware of Nitish and Aditya's long-standing friendship.

Nitish grinned and said, "Naina, do you know our lives were slightly different before the lockdown? In Gurgaon, we had never had a dry month."

Naina frowned and exclaimed, "Oh! It sounds interesting!"

Nitish said, "We had an agreement on Stamp Paper with our friends about the party. It included rules and regulations and every minute details."

Naina was surprised and asked, "Wow, that sounds amazing! Can I see it?"

Nitish replied, "Yes, I can show it to you. Let's go to my cabin."

As they walked from the cafeteria to Nitish's cabin, he retrieved the contract signed by himself, Aditya, Ankit, Kush, and others from his drawer.

The agreement's title was "Agreement for Party," and it stated, "We, the undersigned members, hereby agree that we shall hold no party unless at least four of us are present."

Nitish continued to read, 'Should anyone be found partying without the required majority, they will have to bear the full cost of the next scheduled gathering.'

"The 'Agreement for Party' was mutually agreed upon and signed. It was used for the past three years, before the COVID-19 lockdown." Nitish explained to Naina.

Hearing it, Naina grinned and said, "I would love to be part of the next agreement. I liked this contract."

Nitish happily replied, "We have a selection panel for new members. The current members nominate the new members. Then, we proceed as per our Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)."

Naina grinned and said, "Wow, you have an SOP!" "But it's too much!"

Nitish chuckled, and he said, "You know me. I only believe in written agreements and keeping things organised!"

The next moment, both of them burst into laughter.

Then, Nitish said, "I was just kidding!" "Let the restrictions of COVID get over, and we will make a New Agreement."

And they went silent.

Still sitting in Nitish's cabin, Naina didn't want to leave him alone because she could tell by seeing his face, he was still feeling anxious.

Naina wondered, "Aditya must have informed him when he answered the phone last time; why was he silent? Aditya, evil!"

She felt quite restless. She scrolled through the photo album on her phone to ease herself while Nitish tried to focus on his laptop.

Nitish called Aditya again, but an interactive voice response declared, "The number you are calling is switched off or out of coverage area."

"Aditya would have replied if everything was alright. He might have had some issues," Naina thought, but she said nothing as she didn't want to increase Nitish's anxiety.

"Have you received Aditya's emergency contact number from HR?" Naina asked.

"Not yet," Nitish replied.

"Let's wait until the end of the day and hope he calls," Naina suggested optimistically.

While sitting in Nitish's cabin, Naina was curious to know about Aditya's family, and she asked, "What does Prisha do? And how old is their son?"

Nitish recalled his chat with Aditya and replied, "Aditya always talked about how progressive Prisha had been in her career and how she managed everything at home so efficiently."

"As Aditya mentioned to me, one of Prisha's many admirable qualities was being liked by everyone she met. She was undoubtedly the epitome of gentility."

Naina nodded, impressed by Prisha. "It sounds nice," she said.

Nitish smiled and continued recalling his conversation, "Yes, they had been together for eleven years. They owned an apartment in the high-rise society of Greater Noida. Although Aditya commuted to his job in Gurgaon daily, everything at home ran like clockwork. A housemaid visited them daily at 7 am, and that's how their day started."

He thought back and shared, "They have a son—Aarav, who was about seven and a half years old, was simply adorable. Aditya mentioned that Aarav cared so much about his mom that he checked on her constantly, whatever he did. Aarav and Prisha always held hands whenever they went out."

"Aarav bombarded her with childish questions, which she patiently answered. He attended the same school where Prisha taught. He stuck to his mother at all times and was quite shy, likely because he was primarily raised by only two family members. Aarav loved his mother more than his father."

Nitish added, "Aditya had mentioned that Prisha wanted Aarav to be more extroverted. Pre-lockdown, she had enrolled him in football classes. Although taking him to football practise after work was challenging, but she did it. She was too concerned about Aarav."

"Small and happy family," Naina acknowledged.

Nitish said, "Yes, indeed."

Nitish recalled another conversation where Aditya had mentioned Prisha was a caring mother who frequently took Aarav to the society park to help him become extroverted and make friends.

Eventually, Aarav became close with Rudra, who lived on the fifteenth floor of the same building. Rudra was older than Aarav by three years, was tall, fair, and had a healthy appearance. The two boys became best friends, and Rudra was always protective of Aarav because of their age difference.

Hearing so much about Prisha and Aarav, Naina expressed her curiosity, saying, "I would like to meet Prisha."

Nitish replied, "Even my wife wanted to meet Prisha, but because of COVID they hadn't been able to."

"Though my wife had never met Prisha in person, they had a strong emotional connection."

Nitish explained, "My wife frequently comments on Prisha's WhatsApp status updates, and Prisha does the same in return. And also, they cooked meals for each other and exchanged through their husbands (Aditya and myself), and they had brief interactions over the phone."

Naina felt good, and she said, "Nice."

Nitish recounted Aditya had mentioned that his family was always seen as an idol in society. The way they lived set a

benchmark for others, and they were often referred to as the best couple in society.

Just then, Nitish's phone beeped. There was a WhatsApp message on his phone. He checked it but decided not to answer.

Nitish shared further that someday ago, Aditya talked about his wife, "My wife was a beloved teacher who not only captured the hearts of her students but also won the admiration of their parents. She was known for her engaging demeanour and storytelling skills."

"Prisha was often showered with praise from her students."

"It was not just the kids who adored her. Even her fellow teachers and parents were impressed with her."

"Prisha felt thrilled with the positive feedback from people around her."

"Prisha's charm and perfectionism were hard to miss, and those who met her couldn't help but praise her. She was truly an adorable lady who took pride in her work and strived to be the best at whatever she did. With her warm personality and excellent interpersonal skills, it's no surprise everyone loved Prisha!"

Just then, Naina's phone rang. She looked at the caller ID and didn't seem unhappy with who it was.

Naina excused herself and said, "I have to take this call. I'm sorry. Let's catch up at lunchtime." While stepping out of the cabin.

Nitish replied, "Of course, no problem. Thank you for your time today."

CHAPTER -III

As the clock struck twelve, the sun peeked out from behind the clouds, casting its bright light. Fresheners sprayed in the morning had already dissipated, leaving no lingering fragrance in the air. People were engaged in lively conversations and focused on their tasks throughout the seating areas of the office.

After wrapping up his meetings, Ankit headed back to the bustling marketing department. But to his surprise, Aditya wasn't at his desk. Remembering that he had met Nitish in the morning, Ankit knew he would know about Aditya's whereabouts and approached him.

Reaching Nitish, Ankit asked, "Hey, where's your buddy Aditya today?"

"You guys always come in on the same day during COVID-19 restrictions. Is he not coming in today?"

Nitish, who was already feeling lost, took a deep breath and said, "Aditya had planned to visit the hospital with his wife. So, he couldn't come to the office." Then he shared what he heard while they were on call in the morning.

This surprised Ankit, and he also grew anxious and asked, "So, you mean they were in an Ambulance?"

Nitish replied with a worried expression, "I do not know. We haven't spoken since then, and now I can't even reach him on the phone."

Ankit tried to ease the worried expression on Nitish's face and said, "Don't worry, my friend. Everything will be alright."

Nitish said, "I am just praying for Aditya's wife, Aditya, and their kid."

Ankit said, "There could be a network issue at his end."

Nitish replied, "Maybe. Even Naina has the same intuition."

To ease the tense environment, Ankit thought to recount a wonderful happening in the life of his best friend.

Ankit grinned and exclaimed, "My dear friend, life is an exciting journey filled with adventures, fun, joy, and unexpected pleasures!" "Hey, do you remember when one of my buddies dropped by the office recently?"

Nitish recalled and asked, "Sushant, right?"

Ankit said, "Yes," and laughed out loud.

Ankit and Sushant had been best friends since they were kids.

Sushant, a typical Delhiite guy, was a charming man who was well-liked by many. They went to school together until the twelfth grade. Then, Ankit pursued his bachelor's degree in business administration and master's in management at a college in NCR, while Sushant became a Chartered Accountant.

Even though their career paths diverged, they still caught up regularly.

Ankit said happily, "In a society where the caste system is so prevalent, people often marry within their caste. For example, Jats marry Jats, Pandits marry Pandits, Rajputs marry Rajputs, and Singhs marry Singhs. However, my friend fell in love with a Polish girl named Sophia, whom he had never met before."

Nitish exclaimed, "Wow! That's really surprising! It shows that love knows no boundaries, not even nationalities or cultures."

Ankit replied, "Yes, Nitish, love truly knows no boundaries."

Sophia was a striking woman from Poland. She was 5'6" tall, with a fair complexion and long, curly black hair that fell to her shoulders. Her most distinctive feature was her captivating green eyes. With a degree in architecture, Sophia

owned her own flat and spent most of her weekdays working in an office. However, she liked to travel on weekends and enjoy a pint of beer at the local pub.

Ankit said, "Sushant sent a friend request to Sophia, whose profile he saw randomly someday ago. He could check out her photo album a few days ago."

"Each day, Sushant checked out her album."

"Sophia accepted the request, and soon they started chatting."

Ankit said, "So, from Facebook chat for a week, they took their relationship to WhatsApp, and from WhatsApp, they proposed to meet on Zoom."

Nitish asked, "Is Sushant really that smart?"

Ankit said, "Certainly, he fits that description."

Nitish remarked, "Is it really so easy to rely on a person you met online in such an unpredictable world?"

Ankit pointed out, "Nitish, therefore, as I always tell you, meeting people is nothing but God's plan."

"Oh, holy crap?" "Stop mentioning God's plan!" Nitish exclaimed. "Anyway, not all cases are the same. So, what happened between them?"

Ankit continued, "They talked for hours on video calls and through all the media."

"And this way, they spent over two months getting to know each other better through virtual means."

"And then they decided to meet in person."

Ankit explained Sushant's past: "Sushant had dated several Indian girls during his college days, but he had always had a soft spot for Polish girls. It always surprised me the way Sushant fell for a Polish girl. And finally, he was connected to his dream girl."

He continued, "After securing a tourist visa, he took off to Warsaw in Poland to spend an entire month at Sophia's house. They embarked on many adventures, exploring the city and each other's company. He found her more beautiful in person."

"As the days passed, they couldn't resist the sparks that flew between them, and they fell deeply in love."

"With a sigh of relief, Ankit added, "Sushant finally met Sophia's parents, and she introduced him as her boyfriend."

"After some days, Sushant requested Sophia to fly to India."

"Sophia's parents were really supportive of her relationship and had no problem with her visiting India with Sushant."

Nitish's face lit up with excitement, and he asked, "What unfolded later?"

He asked, "Did she come to India?"

Ankit replied, "Sophia finally arrived in Delhi, and Sushant took care of her stay at a luxurious five-star hotel in NCR. She was so fascinated with Indian culture that she stopped wearing her Western clothes."

"Meanwhile, we helped Sushant find suitable rental accommodation for Sophia."

Nitish nodded in agreement. "That's great to hear!"

Ankit continued, "During her stay in India, she travelled to various parts of the country with Sushant, allowing her to immerse herself in the diverse culture and heritage. The vibrant colours, delicious food, and the warmth of the people fascinated Sophia."

"She even attempted to learn some traditional Indian recipes from Sushant's mother."

Nitish exclaimed, "That's great!"

Ankit continued, "Once a week over the weekend, I tutored Sophia Hindi. Everyone showered her with affection. It turned out that Sophia wasn't completely off base with her assumptions about India!"

"She felt deeply connected to India!"

"After some weeks, Sophia moved to a rented accommodation in Delhi, and in a few days, Sushant also shifted with her and experienced the life of Delhi and the NCR together." Ankit chuckled as he further described.

Nitish listened intently and asked, "And then what happened?" "Did they marry?"

Ankit replied, "Well, after a few months, Sushant proposed to Sophia to marry her, and she said yes!"

"Then the real drama started!"

Nitish exclaimed, "What! Conflict after living together for so long!"

He then calculated the time Sophia and Sushant stayed together, "So they lived together for three months in India and then two months in Poland. That makes it five months."

Ankit continued, "Yes, they stayed together for a long time. But it wasn't a simple task for them to proceed further. They had to convince their families and make them understand. As you know, there are a lot of societal norms, especially for marriage."

Nitish nodded in agreement. "Yes, I can imagine. So, how did they convince their families?"

Ankit replied, "They kept trying and didn't give up. They talked to their families repeatedly, explained their feelings, and tried to make them understand they were meant to be together."

But the drama was in full swing. Sushant's family was hesitant because of the cultural and racial differences. The key issue in their relationship was that they could not

convince their family, "Who would settle in which country?"

Ankit said, "As time passed, Sushant's dad became increasingly agitated because he saw no future in it. He had a different perspective on their relationship and expressed his concerns openly. While her mom melted seeing the couple together."

"Although Sushant's parents introduced him to many potential brides, he remained disinterested."

"The moral science lessons, historical context, and psychological tales that his parents shared with him had no effect."

Sushant kept pestering his father, saying, "It is Sophia or no one! Dad! I won't marry to anyone else."

Sushant's father grew furious and warned, "No matter how much you like her, she will never step foot in my house if you marry her. You can buy or rent your own home and live in it."

Ankit said, "Following with the warning, Sushant's father stopped talking to Sushant after he did not hear his strict advice."

Ankit continued, "Sushant and Sophia resisted the objections from all the front."

"Contrary to the situation around them, they never stop and explore options for marriage."

"Though they did not know the process of registering marriage, they knew they had to live together forever."

"In addition, Sophia's parents also worried about what lay ahead for their daughter. Sophia also did not listen to any advice from her parents, either."

During a meeting with Sushant, he asked me, "Brother, how can I get married to Sophia?" "Do you have any idea about the process for marrying a foreigner?" As even Sushant did not know about further steps in their relationship.

I replied to Sushant with a heavy heart, "I'm sorry, brother." "Neither my family members, relatives, neighbours, college mates, nor my friends have been in a similar situation. I don't know anyone who has married a Polish girl."

Sushant pleaded, "Please help me, brother. I also don't know anyone who can guide me in this marriage."

Ankit assured Sushant, saying, "Don't worry. We'll work together to figure out a solution."

Ankit further shared with Nitish, "Later, Sushant and I consulted with several marriage lawyers as this was not a typical marriage between two Indians."

"After meeting various lawyers, we finally found one who could assist us with the legal procedures and documentation."

Nitish nodded and said, "Great job! Ankit. You are a really nice person!"

Ankit added, "There were some clauses and compliance requirements related to Sophia's stay in India. As well as various other legal formalities that needed to be taken care of."

Meanwhile, the cabin's door opened, and Naina came in and asked, "Hey, Nitish. Did Aditya call you back?"

Nitish replied, "No, not yet. I'm getting worried and thinking of going to his house to check on him."

Naina concealed her concerns but felt that Aditya might have responded if he were in a stable state of mind, considering that he had dropped the call abruptly, saying, "Emergency with wife."

She told Nitish, "Okay, let's catch up during lunchtime," before leaving the place.

Nitish asked Ankit, "So, did they get married? It's quite an interesting love story!"

Ankit responded with a smile, "They have planned to get married."

Nitish exclaimed and said, "It's great to see people from diverse cultures coming together and embracing each other's differences!"

Ankit explained, "Sophia had come to India on a tourist visa. There were certain constraints with the tourist visa. It was valid for ninety days. Since they couldn't get a visa for dating, they had to manage with the limited options available."

"After three months, Sophia's tourist visa expired, and she had to return to Poland. Sushant went back to his home soon after she left the country."

Nitish said, "Hmm, great couple! I hope their relationship lasts eternally. Wish they get married!"

Ankit remarked, "I wish the same."

After listening to an interesting love story, Ankit noticed Nitish's face was not yet so bright. He asked Nitish. I feel like you're still tense. "What is going on inside your mind?"

Nitish said, "I rarely worry about anything, but the sound of the ambulance, no response despite answering the phone once, followed by failing to reach him on his mobile, and now no response at all, is causing a lot of anxiety."

"I feel he might be preoccupied with his wife's medical condition. Still, I'm not able to convince myself, as he has never acted like this before."

Meanwhile, Nitish relaxed with a new thought that stuck in his mind. "Aditya had mentioned going to the hospital at lunchtime today, so maybe he would accompany his wife. I

am confident that he would have informed me of anything serious."

Nitish then asked to Ankit, "Shall we go for lunch now?"

Ankit grinned and answered, "Though I have already tasted lunch after my meeting, as I could not hold myself back knowing that there is pasta for my lunch. Anyway, let's have lunch together."

Nitish nodded and called Naina over the intercom, "Let's catch up over lunch."

Naina replied, "Sure."

Then Nitish said to Ankit, "Let's go."

Ankit replied, "Okay, you reach the cafeteria. I'll join you shortly."

After a while, Nitish, Ankit, and Naina took their tasty lunches as usual, sharing them with each other, and left for a stroll.

They returned to their workstations after another twenty minutes.

As the day progressed, they realised Aditya had returned none of the calls. After some time, Nitish turned to Naina and Ankit and expressed his concern, "Hey, guys, I'm getting too worried about Aditya. I haven't heard from him yet, and I can't wait any longer."

"I'm planning to go to his place now. Would anyone like to join me?"

Ankit replied, "I have a meeting in Delhi, so I won't be able to accompany you, Nitish. Sorry about that."

Nitish turned to Naina and asked, "Would you like to accompany me?"

Naina replied, "Sorry, Nitish, I have critical work to finish today."

Nitish replied, "No problem, but I can't hold out any longer. I've been waiting all day. I'm going to go to his home."

Naina asked, "Have you been to his house before?"

Nitish answered, "No, but I have an idea of the society he lives in. One of my acquaintances has a flat near Aditya's home."

"Okay, Nitish. Let me know how they are after you see them," Naina requested.

Nitish shut down his laptop and reviewed the distance and route on Google Maps.

Before leaving the office, he double-checked the travel time and the best route on the map. Google Maps displayed the optimal route as "65 kilometres with a travel time of 1 hour and 53 minutes."

After reviewing the route, Nitish exited the office and took the elevator to leave.

As he exited the elevator and headed towards the exit gate, Nitish heard someone call out his name. "Hey, Nitish."

Nitish looked back, recognising the voice. He saw that it was Kush. "Hey, Kush," Nitish responded.

Kush worked with Nitish in the finance department, and they shared a good rapport as their thought processes matched. Like Naina, he had the habit of answering phone calls, even if they irritated him, and his conversations with those he talked to went on longer than usual. However, he often made faces when the phone rang.

Apart from this, Kush had another unique habit. He regularly checked his photo gallery and social media accounts on his mobile, possibly following someone. Although he was 37, he had never been married, and his relationships seemed to be at a standstill. He appeared to miss someone and checked his social media frequently. Still, he had not confided in anyone about this.

Nitish said, "Hi, Kush."

He then asked Kush, "Hello, how are you?"

Kush replied, "I'm good, thank you."

Kush asked Nitish, "So, are you leaving early or going to a meeting?"

Kush, the star of the office, stood tall at 6'1" with a fair complexion. His charming appearance was amplified by his sleek black spectacles and a perpetual grin. He was a foodie at heart, and his office drawer always had dry snacks to munch on. Despite his love for food, he remained fit and thin, which was impressive.

Kush was a workaholic, and his dedication was evident, as he was always glued to his desk. However, his past was a mystery, and he revealed nothing about it to anyone.

Kush was quite a remarkable individual with a unique habit. Whenever he faced a difficulty, he celebrated it in an extraordinary way. For instance, when he felt unwell, he didn't stay at home feeling miserable. Instead, he brought sweets to the office to share with his colleagues, spreading joy and happiness all around.

Once, he had a headache, so instead of feeling sorry for himself, he ordered a cake to celebrate the headache! And when he received a lower-than-expected increment and appraisal, he didn't get disheartened. Rather, he ordered ice cream for his teammates, raising their spirits and boosting their morale.

It appeared that Kush developed a unique way of finding relief from the troubles he would have faced in his life. He celebrated all his troubles and pleasures with a very positive and remarkable attitude.

Nitish explained what he and Aditya had discussed the previous night, how the call was abruptly disconnected, and what he heard later.

He reiterated, "How could they take an ambulance? I'm worried just thinking about it." "I need to leave now."

Nitish confided in Kush and said, "I can't wait to meet and see Aditya. It's been five hours since we last spoke."

Nitish added, "In case he calls me, I will return from the middle of the way." "I feel he may need me right now."

Kush cautioned, "His home is quite far, Nitish. Is it okay if you get stuck in traffic on the way back home?"

Nitish replied, "Kush, the intensity of my desire to see him is so strong that it overpowers my concern about getting stuck in traffic, and arriving home late."

Kush said, "I would have loved to join you, but my uncle is coming home in the evening."

Nitish reassured him, "No worries, I am okay going alone."

Kush advised, "Make sure you don't get too late, Nitish. Otherwise, you'll be stuck in heavy traffic."

Nitish agreed, "You're right. I should leave now!" "See you!"

Nitish quickly came to his car, paid the parking fee at the exit, and set off for Aditya's home.

As Nitish hit the road, he switched on to the FM radio.

The music played on the radio helped him feel relaxed as he drove.

After a while, Nitish changed the radio frequency and stumbled upon the cheerful RJ Ginnie on Radio City 91.1 FM. Today. She had an extended show time, and her lively voice immediately lifted his mood.

He turned up the volume as she played "Ek Pyar Ka Naghma Hai" by Lata Mangeshkar and Mukesh, with music composed by Laxmikant Pyarelal.

Credit: RJ Ginnie, Credit: Radio City 91.1 FM. Credit Song title: Ek Pyar ka nagam hai; Credit singer: Lata Mangeshkar, Mukesh Credit Music: Laxmikant Pyarelal; Credit Lyricist: Santosh Anand; Credit Music label: Saregama.

Nitish continued driving while thinking about his past life and switching the frequency of FM radio.

RJ Ginnie again raised the sentiment of Nitish by presenting another melodious song:

"Lag jaa gale, ki phir ye hansi raat ho na ho....." a famous song by Lata Mangeshkar;

(Credit: RJ Ginnie, Credit: Radio City 91.1 FM, Credit song title: Lag jaa gale, ki phir...; Credit: Lata Mangeshkar, Credit Composer (s): Madan Mohan, Credit Lyricist: Raja Mehdi Ali Khan, Credit Producer: Saregama)

As Nitish drove, he tried to connect with Aditya on the phone. However, his phone was not yet going through. He continued to listen to FM as a revised route to his destination appeared on his phone's Google Maps.

Nitish checked the map as it showed heavy traffic, adding an extra hour to his travel time and delaying his expected arrival. The map showed the entire route in red, indicating severe traffic congestion.

Nitish reacted, "Oh, Traffic! " And kept driving toward Aditya's house.

CHAPTER -IV

"On a moonless night, the darkness enveloped the city, obscuring the stars behind thick clouds. Poor visibility was further hampered by the fog that had settled in. As the night approached, the temperature dropped, and chill winds blew from the east, sweeping towards the west." Kush described.

"The temperature in the city hovered around 18 degrees Celsius, but with the onset of winter, the cold was to intensify over the coming weeks."

"It was December 1984 in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh."

During a tea break at around 4.00 pm on February 8, 2021, Kush shared a horrific incident involving his parents with his colleagues, Naina and Ankit.

Kush saw Nitish off an hour ago as he went to Aditya's house. They were unaware of what happened at Aditya's end. It was

some tragedy, or it was just a case of a weak network. Naina finished her work and went to the cafeteria, while Ankit's second appointment was postponed, so he was also free.

Everyone was in the cafeteria over the tea table.

Kush continued, "The city was peaceful, with families spending time together, children playing happily, and people shopping and socialising with friends and neighbours."

"Some were expecting their children's exams to get over, so they could plan a vacation. Life carried on as usual."

"A month ago, the city had come alive with the festival of Diwali. People decorated their homes with candles and oil lamps. The sounds of firecrackers still lingered in the memories of the city's dwellers. The town's residents exchanged gifts and sweets, bringing joy to one another. Further, the plans for New Year's celebrations were also in place."

"None had an idea what the next moment would bring."

"My mother awaited a healthy baby's birth in the same city. She was already seven months pregnant, and the unborn child was comfortably nestled in her womb, the safest place on earth. She had planned to give birth at a nearby nursing home, and everything was progressing smoothly."

Kush's voice lowered as he spoke, his thoughts drifting away.

"Whenever my mother recounts this story, I feel lost. It's as if

I'm reliving the moment. The same thing happens to me when I share those events."

"I firmly believe that humans have no control over anything. Life is a journey full of surprises. No matter how much we plan, we can never accurately predict what will happen next."

Meanwhile, a rattling sound came from the cafeteria door because of a mechanical problem. The door opened, and it was Mayank who entered through it.

Mayank, a chartered accountant, oversaw the finance department. Everyone appreciated his logical approach to work and leadership skills. He had all black hair, and he put on thick spectacles.

Kush worked under the supervision of Mayank in the company.

Kush noticed him and paused briefly while enjoying beverages.

When Mayank ended his call, Kush greeted him with a smile and said, "Hey, Mayank, good afternoon."

Mayank replied, "Hello, good afternoon," and went to the dispenser.

Kush smiled and invited him to join them, but Mayank declined politely and said, "I am busy with work. Thank you for the offer, Kush."

As Mayank filled hot water in his tea bottle, he noticed they were all sitting except for Aditya and Nitish. He couldn't help but ask, "Hey, where are your other buddies, Aditya and Nitish?"

"You guys always sit together and come together during COVID restrictions in the office."

Ankit recounted the events and shared, "Nitish was on the phone with Aditya this morning, as usual, since they travel around the same time. While he was driving, he overheard Aditya's son's voice in the background, and suddenly Aditya said, 'Nitish, it's an emergency with my wife,' and then he abruptly disconnected the call."

"Later, the call connected, and he heard an ambulance wailing and an announcement to give way."

"After that, Aditya's phone was unreachable or out of the network coverage area. Though Nitish tried calling Aditya many times, but he failed to connect. He grew desperate to find out what happened and left for Aditya's home about an hour ago."

"Let's hope everything is okay," Ankit said, and paused.

Mayank said, "It's good that Nitish went. We can't say anything."

Naina replied, "Yes, we should wait for Nitish's call. He would be driving, and I've asked him to get in touch with us once he reaches."

"Alright, please update me too, once Nitish meets Aditya."
"I'll catch up later," Mayank said.

"Absolutely, we're all waiting for Nitish's update," Ankit replied.

Mayank left the cafeteria, and Kush continued his parent's story, "It was December 2, 1984, in Bhopal, the most tragic night in the history of India. My mother was seven months pregnant."

"It was a horrific night that had haunted generations ever since."

"At around 11.30 pm, a hazardous gas (methyl isocyanate) leaked from the Union Carbide India Limited plant. And it kept mixing with air, making it hazardous."

"It was so dangerous that those who breathed in the poisonous gas collapsed and died immediately. That night, my mother, father, and siblings went to bed as usual. Suddenly, they were awakened by a loud noise."

"In the middle of the night, police announcements and emergency alarms jolted the city."

"The police announced while rushing their vehicles, 'Emergency! Dangerous gas leaked! Evacuate the city immediately!'"

"People rushed out, scrambling to leave by any means necessary. They abandoned their homes and possessions

without a second thought. However, in those days, few people owned cars, so the public used every viable form of transportation, from buses to rickshaws to bicycles, to leave the city."

"While my parents decided to leave the city on the train, which was coming in a few hours, to Bhopal. But they couldn't find a ride to the railway station, so they had to leave on foot. They were stranded in the middle of the city. The station was around five kilometres away."

"Despite being seven months pregnant, my mother refused to give up and walked the entire distance," Kush said.

Naina sympathised, "That must have been a hard experience. It's heart-melting to imagine what people must have gone through!"

Kush continued, "The poisonous gas was rapidly mixed with the air, devastating every area it reached through the airflow."

"The news of people losing consciousness and dying was echoing throughout the city."

"During those times, there were no emergency plans for city evacuation, and the government's disaster management programme was not active."

They all sat silently, reflecting on the tragic event almost three decades ago.

Kush continued, "People were left to save themselves. Screams and cries filled the air. The public was left to rely on God's mercy. They left everything behind and ran for their lives."

"My mother broke down many times while walking down the street. Anyhow, my parents reached the railway station amid the horrific scene everywhere."

"Oh, how terrible!" Naina exclaimed.

Ankit cut in, curious, "What happened to your mother then? Did they survive?"

"They reached to the railway station through their determination and love for each other and their children," Kush replied.

"The scene was very pathetic here. A handful of malicious people stole from others at the station. My parents felt terrible seeing humanity dying."

Hearing it, Ankit could not stop himself and said, "Oh! On the verge of dying, people stole the belongings of others." "How mean people can be!"

Kush continued, "My parents boarded the train. It was so packed with people that it was difficult to move through the crowded coach. Passengers occupied every available space on the train to leave the city. Everyone was desperate to escape, as death was the only other option."

"Many passengers were so desperate to reach their destination that they risked their lives sitting on the train's roof."

Susiana wept upon hearing the horrific incident. She wiped her tears and said, "I can't even imagine what your family had to endure."

Kush nodded and continued, "As people pleaded for an inch of space on the train, manhandling began when it became clear that they would not get one. Amid the increasing chaos, the train left the station, blowing its horn."

"People began running after the train, desperately grabbing the windows' grill to catch it. Some were lucky enough to succeed, finding any means to escape the city. Those left behind knew they had little time before the poisonous gas caught up."

"They had to choose: run on foot along the tracks or face certain death."

"Many started their journey on foot, but only a few survived, as their race was against time itself."

"On the other hand, my parents and siblings were inside the train and stood in the aisle as every inch of the train was occupied."

Kush said. "My father pleaded with the passengers, 'Please give a seat to my pregnant wife.'"

"However, nobody came forward to assist her despite pleadings."

"Most people denied it upfront because they had already struggled to reach the train and secure their survival by squeezing into it."

"Just then, an elderly woman sitting on the upper berth bench said, "Please come up."

"My father was so touched by her generosity that he immediately expressed his gratitude and helped my mother climb up to the upper berth."

It was a second-class general bogie with stripped wooden seats. The bogie had iron windows and black fans plugged into the ceiling. During those times, the train had a white top and a red exterior.

As the train continued to move forward, it blew its horn, creating a breath-taking sight, with smoke rising from its smokestack.

My parents decided to deboard in Pune, where our maternal family was.

It was approximately 900 kilometres from Bhopal, and the train typically took 22 hours, but because of the overcrowding, it ran slower that day.

"The future of everyone was uncertain, as they might have already come into contact with the gas. Nobody knew the

long-term effects of the gas yet."

Just then, a phone rang. It was Naina's phone.

She took out the phone, saw the caller's name, and ignored it.

The phone call disrupted the narrative's rhythm, diverting everyone's attention.

Kush frowned at Naina and gestured to Ankit. Ankit observed Naina's worried expression but said nothing.

Next moment, Ankit turned to Kush and Naina, and said, "Let me check if Nitish arrived."

The phone connected.

"Hello, hey, have you reached Aditya's house?" Ankit asked Nitish over the phone.

Frustrated, Nitish replied, "Is it possible to travel anywhere without encountering a traffic jam?"

"I'm stuck in the choked traffic. I expect to be there in about an hour."

Ankit acknowledged Nitish's response and said, "Okay, keep me updated. We're all worried about Aditya and his family."

Nitish agreed, "Sure, I'll keep you all informed."

With that, the phone call ended.

Ankit informed everyone, "Hey, he is stuck in a jam. He is expecting to reach in an hour."

Naina and Kush nodded and echoed, "Don't worry, nothing will happen. It's all right at Aditya's end."

Naina asked, "Kush, so what happened to your parents? Did they get affected by the gas?"

Kush replied, "My parents reached the destination after travelling for over twenty-two hours in a general bogie."

"Despite being pregnant, my mother sat uncomfortably with a bent neck, as the train ceiling was too low."

"However, she was determined to protect her unborn child."

"My mom showed immense grit and will and endured discomfort. She repeatedly broke down while trying to bear the pain and her swollen legs. She endured the worst conditions."

"So, did they arrive safely that day?" Ankit asked.

"Yes, they arrived safely," Kush replied

"And what about the unborn child? Did the child survive?" Naina asked.

"After spending a day in Pune and getting comfortable, my mother felt she should get the check-up done," Kush explained.

"My mom said to my father, 'Leaving Bhopal saved our lives. I had to walk a long distance, which was not advised during pregnancy. I sat all day and all night, and

we only had some food. Now, I'm concerned," Kush recounted.

"Let me find a gynaecologist for you," My father agreed to my mother's request.

"After consulting some family members, my father chose a gynaecologist."

The following day, they arrived at the hospital.

"My mother had an ultrasound and other tests performed as directed by the doctor, and they waited for a thorough examination."

The gas leakage tragedy made headlines worldwide within two days.

"The doctor examined the reports and said, 'Your unborn kid is doing well. But that gas has adversely affected people who came into contact with it. Many had died; some became paralysed; and in many other ways, it has harmed. I cannot say whether your child will be healthy.'"

"The government has not yet confirmed the long-term harm of the gas, and we do not have any data to find out the impact of gas on the unborn kid."

"Listening to the doctor, my mother felt anxious."

As she experienced some numbness, she requested a glass of water. She sipped and affirmed, 'I will give birth to a healthy baby!'"

"She repeated her affirmations several times!"

Naina commented, "Despite the soul-tearing incident, she was so determined. Hats off to the parents for their resolve!"

Everyone was impressed by her determination, and was quiet.

Ankit asked, breaking the ice, "So, what happened later? Did the unborn child escape the gas impact?"

"A child was born in the first week of March." Kush continued.

"The child had all his limbs. He responded to the sound, indicating he could hear and had a healthy body. He has everything perfect except for his eyes. The child had an erratic pupil in one eye because a nerve in his brain had not fully developed," Kush revealed.

"And that child is now a 37-year-old man. It's me," he added.

Moved by Kush's story, Ankit got up from his seat and hugged him.

Naina said, "Wow, young man," and hugged him.

Everyone praised Kush's parents for their courage and determination in the face of tragedy. They all sat quietly, imagining what they would have gone through.

In awe of Kush's story, Naina exclaimed, "You escaped death before you were even born, bro! That's amazing!"

Kush grinned and returned to scrolling through his phone while sipping his tea.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Ankit couldn't resist asking, "Do you often look through your family photos?"

Kush just smiled and shook his head, "Not really!"

As Kush's phone rang, he excused himself and answered the call. "Okay, Uncle, I'll pick you up from there," he said before leaving the cafeteria.

Ankit told Naina, "I wouldn't return to the seat." "I'll go get another cup of cappuccino."

Naina said, "I'm eagerly waiting to hear about Aditya now. I wouldn't also go back to the seat."

They returned to the table after refilling the mug.

Kush entered the cafeteria, and his friends immediately noticed something was off. He apologised to them for leaving them for the call and said, making a gloomy face, "Even if we don't like someone, we're taught to listen and understand some important relatives, like my uncle."

Ankit grew curious and asked, "What bothers you? I have noticed that you get fired up every time your uncle calls."

Kush replied, "I don't want to talk badly about any relationships, but this is the same uncle who advised my mother not to spend money on me. I won't survive. Now, this shameless uncle is coming to my house."

Everyone was taken aback and exclaimed, "What?" "Oh!" echoed.

Naina asked, "When did he say that?"

Ankit couldn't hold back his reaction and asked, "But do you still respect him?"

Naina smiled and said, "I had intuition. Your constant smile hid something. I told Ankit once that you're very optimistic and that people become so positive after going through tough times. And it turns out I was right."

Ankit agreed, saying, "Yes, we were talking about your positive attitude."

Kush shared, "I completed my undergraduate studies in 2006 and hoped to secure admission to a good management college in India for further studies."

"One night, while having dinner out of my routine, I found my meals difficult to swallow."

"Seeing me in distress, my mother rushed me to the hospital for a check-up. She didn't want to take any chances since we had already lost my father."

"The doctor recommended a blood test and an X-Ray to check for coughing and prescribed some common medications."

"And the next day, the doctor analysed the report and said, 'Your blood counts are abnormal, and your heart appears enlarged. I advise you to see a Cardiologist immediately.'"

"Following the advice, we consulted a cardiologist who ran several tests. After reviewing my ECG, the cardiologist requested a chest CT scan."

"We reached the hospital with the CT scan, and seeing it, the doctor advised, 'Fly to Delhi or Mumbai immediately. I suspect Cancer.'"

Naina was shocked and said, "Oh! Cancer!" All reacted with surprise.

Kush continued, "During this period, we went through many hopeless times."

"However, we did not move out of town, and my treatment started under a renowned Oncologist from Pune. They admitted me to the hospital for additional tests like a Biopsy, an Endoscopy, and a Blood test."

"After three days of testing, the report came, making everyone numb. I was diagnosed with Thymoma Cancer. They recommended urgent surgery to remove the cancerous mass from my chest within a week."

"My family agreed to it with no second thought."

"On the day of the surgery, the doctors brought me to the Operation Theatre and began the operation. However, they

found it more complicated than expected, with veins wrapped around my food pipe and heart," Kush recounted.

"The doctor took a sample of the mass and sent it to the Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai for urgent testing, which revealed Lymphoblastic Lymphoma Cancer."

Naina couldn't contain her shock and exclaimed, "Oh!"

Ankit was surprised and said, "You endured cancer treatment!"

Kush continued, "The doctor confirmed that the Lymphoblastic Lymphoma Cancer is in stage three. Realising I was too young, the doctor emphasised that I must get treatment. I must live my life!"

"The doctors helped me prepare for the pain of treatment with counselling, knowing that willpower was essential to success!"

"The doctors also encouraged my family to seek treatment, though it required significant financial support."

"During a counselling session, the doctor gave me two options:

Option 1: Do nothing and die from Cancer! Give up entirely!

Option 2: Fight Cancer and endure the painful treatments!

"I vowed I would endure anything to live! I promised both my mother and doctor that I would not give up!"

"A team of doctors, led by a senior Oncologist, devised a treatment plan that involved a successful operation."

"The treatment process was excruciating, involving the repeated removal of my bone marrow. I got over forty big injections in my spine, known as LP injections, which were the most painful phase of the treatment. I also had many CT, PET, X-rays, Blood Tests, and Chemotherapy scans."

Kush continued, "My mother and siblings were determined to support me."

"My family stood by me throughout the journey. They didn't mind selling our family home and jewellery to pay for my medical expenses."

"But when they required additional financial help, they turned to friends and family, and in return, they confronted the harsh reality of society."

"Difficult times in life are the best teachers because they help you understand people and their true nature. We learned people are not always what they show they are."

"So-called close family and friends advised, "Don't spend money on him. He will not survive over five years, despite all expenses. We received plenty of suggestions from all around but no support."

"You will be surprised to learn that the uncle coming to see me today was the most demotivating to my family. He repeated the same thing, "He will not survive!"

"Alright, please let us know. We're leaving for home now," Ankit said.

"Noted," Nitish acknowledged before disconnecting the call.

Ankit updated Naina and Kush, "Nitish might arrive in another 30 minutes."

Naina and Kush replied, "Sure, let us know when he arrives."

Ankit confirmed, "Of course. I'll call and inform you all. It seems he faced heavy traffic today."

They all went back to their seats.

After some time, Ankit packed his bag and went to Naina's workstation, where he found her lost in thought while turning off her laptop.

"What are you thinking about?" Ankit asked.

"I'm shaken by Kush's life incident. I feel he has borne a lot, yet he always smiles," Naina said.

Ankit and Naina sat in silence, reflecting on Kush's life. After some time, they signed off from the office together.

Naina left the office, deep in thought, as she took the lift. Meanwhile, Ankit headed to the basement parking lot to board his car.

Naina decided to walk home as she lived near the office. She had a lot of things running through her mind, including, "We are so connected to the internet that we assume someone is

okay or not based on their last seen status on WhatsApp."
"What an era!"

"She thought Nitish was so worried about the non-response of the phone that he rushed to Aditya's home as he did not hear him on the phone, and WhatsApp's last seen status was not available!"

"When someone's phone is off, we worry more about them. Today, the phone has evolved into an identity," Naina thought.

Naina was still walking. Ankit was driving and encountering the traffic while Nitish reached near Aditya's home.

After a while, Ankit called Nitish while driving. He said, "Hello, I am on my way home. I just thought to check on you."

"Did you reach?"

Nitish replied, "Yes, I can see the towers of his residence. In two minutes, I'll be at his home."

Ankit said, "Okay, let me know how they are."

Nitish replied, "For sure, I shall!"

CHAPTER - V

The setting sun filled the sky with a beautiful shade of orange, marking the end of a lovely day. The temperature had gone up to 22 degrees, thanks to the sun shining in the sky after 11 am today. It was a pleasant evening.

Nitish arrived at Aditya's apartment at the Green Mansion.

It was a high-rise apartment comprising three towers, with some towers having seventeen levels and others having nineteen levels and a basement level. It was full of modern facilities, such as a gym, clubhouse, swimming pool, emergency power backup, and 24-hour video monitoring. The main gate was at least three feet above street level. There was a huge clock on the gate that became a landmark.

The entrance had eye-catching fountains that delighted Nitish.

As he pulled his car up to the barrier, the security guard stopped him and asked, "Where would you go, sir.?"

Nitish replied, "Flat No. E-1504,"

The security guard noted the car number and said, "Okay, please go."

"Please guide me to the route to the parking place," Nitish asked.

Guard replied, "Drive straight down this road and take a right to park your car. You'll find the entrance to the tower there. Take the lift from the lobby."

Nitish said thank you and drove. He checked his watch. "It was 6.00 pm now."

Nitish parked his car at parking slot no. 198 and moved to the lift lobby. He saw three lifts: one labelled "Service Lift" and the other two labelled "Residents Lift".

Nitish checked himself out in the mirror fixed on the column, self-admired himself, said, "Handsome man," raised his collar, and went ahead.

He boarded the lift and pressed the button for the 15th floor.

As Nitish arrived in front of Aditya's flat, he felt relieved.

He pressed the doorbell and heard a "Ting Tong". He waited for the response and then pressed the doorbell again.

But he received no response from inside Aditya's home.

Nitish tried to think positively, "It's a family of three people. They must be at the hospital."

As time passed, he grew anxious, wondering, "Where would they be if not here?"

Soon, frustration set in as Nitish tried calling Aditya but received no answer. He also continued to ring the doorbell, but no one answered.

However, he remained in the corridor and strolled from one end to the other but didn't understand what to do next. He thought, "Who do I contact now?"

As he stood in front of Aditya's apartment, a neighbour appeared from another flat and saw Nitish.

Aditya's neighbour, Punit, approached Nitish and asked, "Hi, may I help you?"

Nitish replied, "Hi, I'm Nitish. I am Aditya's friend."

Punit said, "I'm Punit, the owner of flat no. E1502."

Nitish asked, "Punit, have you seen Aditya?"

Punit's face turned red.

Nitish became anxious as he noticed Punit's visibly upset demeanour.

Punit said nothing and simply put his hand on his forehead.

He led Nitish to the opposite end of the corridor and said, "Prisha passed away this morning."

"Oh, my god!" "What happened?" Tears welled in Nitish's eyes.

Nitish screamed, "Punit, did I listen clearly? Prisha is no more!"

Punit replied, "Yes!" and he also cried.

Nitish collapsed onto the stairs in shock. Tears ran out of his eyes constantly. He said nothing but couldn't stop crying.

Tears brought a reddish hue to Nitish's eyes. Just one word he repeatedly uttered while he was wailing in pain, "Oh God!" "Oh God! "

He was lost in thought. His eyes constantly remained open without blinking. The tears flooded from his eyes for the next few minutes.

Punit waited for some time, then told him, "Hold on to yourself!" "His son may hear it who is in my flat." He thumped on his back.

"Where is Aarav? How is the kid managing, Punit?" Nitish wiped his tears and asked.

Punit answered, "While Aditya was rushing to the Ambulance, he pleaded to take his son along with me as there was no one from his family! Aarav has been with me since morning!"

Nitish said, "Let me meet Aarav."

Punit accompanied Nitish to his flat to meet Aarav.

Aarav recognised Nitish and said, "Hi, Nitish Uncle."

Nitish crouched down to Aarav's level and smiled at him. Aarav looked up and returned the smile.

Nitish asked him, "How are you doing, Champ?"

Aarav replied softly, "I'm fine." Nitish felt a lump in his throat and hugged the little boy tightly."

He whispered to Aarav, "I've got chocolates for you and will give them to you once we go into the parking lot."

Aarav felt happy and responded, "Wow! and he smiled."

Prisha would never come back. She left behind her family and her seven-and-a half- year-adorable son. She was a wonderful mother and wife, an excellent educator and caring daughter, a trustworthy friend and colleague, and a kind neighbour, but she was no more.

Prisha was a self-made woman who had worked hard to achieve her dreams. Her confidence and extroversion had helped her reach great heights, and she had the unwavering support of her family. She was like a free bird, soaring high with perseverance and dedication.

After meeting Aarav, Nitish came out and broke down again. He just couldn't fathom how the kid would cope with the loss! This was the most tragic news!

He had only cried twice before, when his parents passed away and when he heard that Aditya's wife had passed away.

Prisha was a beautiful, intelligent, kind, and generous woman, and her death marked the end of their once-happy family. Aditya and Prisha were happy together, but they met evil eyes!

Nitish heard a ringtone on his phone. He checked it out. It was Aditya's call.

Aditya said loudly, "Nitish, my wife is no more! I could not save her!"

Then Aditya put the phone on mute.

Nitish responded, "I am standing outside your flat. I know, Aditya! Hold yourself! I will stand by you!"

Aditya pleaded, "Nitish, I don't know how to tell my son that his mom is no more! He does not know what happened! He would still be thinking, "She is admitted to the hospital!"

"I dare not tell him!"

"Please help me! I want Aarav to be safe from any shock! He loves her very much!"

Aditya sobbed and muted the phone.

He unmuted and continued, "Aarav is too small. What should I do? Please tell me!"

Nitish replied, "As you appropriately did, don't inform Aarav. Give it some time, and you'll get an idea of how to handle this situation."

Nitish asked, "Where are you now?"

Aditya said, "I am yet out of the mortuary."

Aditya added, "I've requested my elder sibling, Vyom, who gets along well with Aarav. He flew from the native. Depending on traffic, he could arrive as late as this evening."

"Somehow, I'll muster the strength to deal with my son."

Vyom was Aditya's elder brother and Aarav's Dadau. Dadau was a unique title, which Aarav uttered naturally when Aarav was one and a half years old, and they were on a family trip on New Year's vacation. Since then, Aarav had been calling his big daddy "Dadau". Aarav loved Dadau alongside his parents, though they had not met each other for over one and a half years.

Vyom, three years older than Aditya, was married and blessed with a son named Robin. Vyom was 5 feet-5 inches tall, had a slim build, and was known for his brilliant mind.

Nitish encouraged Aditya, "Okay, it's good that you are managing a person with whom Aarav is too friendly. Let him

join us. Meanwhile, I am waiting in the corridor. I hope you'll join me soon."

"Yea, I am on the way," Aditya replied.

And, they hung up the phone.

Nitish froze in silence. His mind raced with questions about managing the challenges and uncertainties ahead. He felt overwhelmed by the darkness looming before Aditya.

Just then, another call appeared on the screen of Nitish's phone. "It was Ankit's call."

"Hey, did you meet Aditya?" Ankit asked.

"What are you doing?" Nitish asked while repressing his emotions.

"I'm driving and will get home soon," Ankit replied.

"Park your car in a safe place," Nitish said.

Ankit asked, "Why?"

Nitish replied, "Just Park and call!" And Nitish disconnected the call.

Ankit called again after parking his car.

Nitish answered the phone, and said, "Aditya's wife is no more."

Ankit yelled in shock, "What!"

Before visitors entered the home, Aditya and Nitish said, "Please let Aarav not know anything." Though, Aarav was puzzled, wondering why visitors were coming to his home.

Everyone burst into tears!

Later, some people helped Aditya pack some clothes for him and his son as they planned to move to their native.

Nobody had an idea how to prepare for a trip without Prisha.

Aditya hired an ambulance and an Innova car to travel overnight as he decided to take his beloved wife to the native.

It was time to start the journey at 9.30 pm on Feb 08, 2021, a black day in the life of Aditya. A day whose memory will jolt him his entire life.

Some relatives and a few neighbours came down to the lift lobby to say goodbye.

Aditya embarked on a journey to carry Prisha to her hometown, where she was born and raised. She was in the freezer compartment of an Ambulance while Aarav, Aditya, Nitish, and Vyom sat in another car.

The ambulance driver was instructed not to speak with their car driver to avoid disclosing any information to Aarav.

A bright full moon greeted them from the sky as they left their apartment compound. The breeze was crisp and

refreshing, and the flowers were at their peak in the entire city.

Aditya gazed at a full moon as soon as their car passed the outskirts.

Aditya wondered, "Why aren't there any clouds today since they usually used to be by now in the past few days?"

"Why is the moon at its full splendour today? Plus, why have the clouds cleared, revealing stars that were hidden by fog in the past days?"

"All are there!"

Meanwhile, Aarav asked his daddy, "When will Mumma return?" "Where is she?"

Aditya answered, "She has been admitted to the hospital."

"Can I see her?" Aarav asked.

"The doctor instructed her not to meet with anyone," Aditya replied after thinking about what to say.

"Daddy, why are we going to Gorakhpur?" "Is there any function?" After travelling some distance and thinking, Aarav asked.

Aditya replied, "We're going there because Mumma's doctor is transferring her to a hospital there." He avoided eye contact with Aarav and looked in another direction while speaking.

Aarav exclaimed, "I am thrilled, Daddy!" after learning that Mumma was also coming to Gorakhpur.

"Wow, Daddy!"

"This trip is going to be fantastic!" Aarav said in excitement.

Aarav's excitement was palpable and worried everyone, including Vyom and Nitish.

They took a deep breath and wiped away tears while looking in different directions.

Aditya ran his hands through Aarav's hair and back, gripped him tightly, and said, "Yea, we will enjoy the trip. Sleep now."

He put Aarav to sleep on his lap while he fielded calls.

En route, on the Yamuna Expressway, Aditya noticed the full moon again and thought, "Why is this moon not leaving me alone?"

"For what reason does it keep following me?"

"And what is wrong with the stars today?" "Why are they twinkling so brightly?"

It was the first journey for Aarav without Prisha today!

While Aarav slept peacefully, Aditya dreamed away. He had a clear mental picture of her. The memories of his time with Prisha came flooding back to him. He was thinking about the plan the two of them had hatched.

While an Innova car was racing ahead of an Ambulance with its lights flashing and siren blaring, Aditya wandered aimlessly.

The vehicles were going towards Gorakhpur, a city in Uttar Pradesh.

Aditya and Prisha had known each other since childhood. They grew up in the same town and lived only three kilometres apart. Prisha's father and Aditya's father were good friends.

Aditya was trying to recall when he first heard the name Prisha and when he first saw her. But he was not able to recall it.

He felt people usually remember when they first met their spouse, but unfortunately, he couldn't recall her first glimpse because he would be a kid then.

The memory of the first glimpse didn't come to his mind.

Aditya and Prisha completed their college educations in their hometown, where they frequented the same hangout spots. There weren't any shopping malls in their town when they were kids, so mom-and-pop stores were thriving.

After a challenging journey, Aditya got his dream job, and Prisha gained education, qualities, and traits after marriage. She secured employment with the most famous school brand in India and was successful in her life.

However, at this critical juncture, the future appeared uncertain.

They had in-laws' houses in the same city. It allowed them to make the most of their vacation time and avoid making two trips.

Whenever they visited their hometown, it brought back all their childhood memories.

The beacon of the Ambulance kept flashing the light, and the car they were travelling to kept a distance. They did not interact. Both vehicles stopped at different points for a snack break and coordinated over the phone. Everyone was worried about Aarav.

Aditya stared at the moon and stars repeatedly. He disliked them the worst. He wished, "May there be clouds! "I don't want to see the twinkling stars and moon; they are scratching me."

Aarav was sleeping, changing sides. His front two milk teeth fell out in the last month.

Aditya recalled, "Just twelve days ago, they made a Republic Day celebration video. Prisha felt nice seeing the video. She shared it with many people. Her last words to Aarav and I both were, "I love you!"

Aditya, 27, and Prisha, 24, married and started a life together in 2010. They had weathered the storms of life together, overcame the obstacles that stood in their way, and

reached the pinnacle of success. They had a life with nearly everything a happy family could want.

God blessed them with a son, whom they raised with great care, instilling their best values in him. But, when their son reached the age of seven and a half years, the angel who gave birth had gone!

To this day, Prisha always felt most happy listening to the accolades of society, especially the title of "best couple." "They are a perfect match".

The universe intended for them to be together. "They looked nice together. They always walked, joining their hands."

In the 2000s, Gorakhpur went through sea changes on various fronts.

And during the 2010s, Gorakhpur made improvements, including a domestic airport that connected it to major Indian cities.

In 2017, Gorakhpur made remarkable progress in various areas, including infrastructure, electricity supply, public development, policing, and crime reduction, following the election of its Lok Sabha representative as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.

The re-election of Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister was another crown for the city of Gorakhpur.

Aditya and Prisha had a wonderful time with their family and friends during their 2019 Diwali (October) visit to their hometown.

In October 2019, no one had any idea that the world would change forever.

The news of COVID-19 caused a worldwide uproar a month after their return from their hometown.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic because of the rapid spread of the virus. As it continued to spread globally, healthcare demand surged, leading to medical emergencies in many countries that were unprepared for such a crisis.

By the summer of 2020, COVID-19 had spread throughout India.

Aditya and Prisha had planned to go to their hometown after the COVID-19 curfew was lifted in mid-2020. They again planned during the last few months of 2020. Unfortunately, they could not do so.

At 3 am on February 9, 2021, Aditya's train of thought was interrupted by the flashing lights of the approaching Ambulance. He reiterated to the driver, "Please do not drive too closely."

Although both drivers had become friends over the phone as they took a break every two hours during the journey.

Aditya then checked Nitish in the back seat, who was also fielding calls from relatives after Vyom had passed his contact information. Nitish also informed all of their mutual colleagues and friends about Prisha.

The Ambulance continued to blare its sirens as it rushed towards its destination. Its beacon flashed frantically.

The moon and stars were still visible, but their brilliance had faded with the coming dawn. Aditya glanced at his watch. It was 5 am.

While Aarav was still dozing off, his sleep was interrupted frequently as he woke up to check on his father.

In the meantime, Nitish and Vyom had fallen asleep.

As vehicles drove through the early morning fog, the driver honked, turned on the parking lights, and moved slowly. They encountered patches of dense fog on some parts of their route.

The vehicles kept moving, the sky brightened, and the air got chilled.

Slowly, the sky turned orange as the sun rose.

By this time, the moon, stars, fog, and everyone else had bid farewell to Aditya!

As the vehicle travelled, the sky became increasingly brighter.

Aarav woke up during the journey and asked his father, "I see an ambulance following us, sometimes ahead of us."

Aarav asked, "If the ambulance was also heading to Gorakhpur, Daddy?"

Aditya replied, "I do not know. Maybe!"

Aditya tried to induce Aarav to sleep again, and in doing so, he also closed his eyes and fell asleep.

CHAPTER - VI

"Prisha, when I first imagined you as my wife, I imagined your face identical to your grandma's, with white hair in our old age." Aditya dreamed while waiting to reach home.

Aditya had always imagined growing old with her until their last breaths. They bought a small home to live forever together, but now Prisha was placed in the freezer compartment of an Ambulance. While Aditya held his son in his lap and dozed off.

The vehicle ran near the home.

In another moment, Aditya reached home in Gorakhpur with his beloved wife. He saw many people gathered here.

The atmosphere was heavy with grief. Wailing and sobbing echoed through the house.

On the other hand, taking advantage of the tragic event, some unknown people in the crowd muttered to each other and created their own narratives, spreading negative comments through gossip. The strange people in the crowd were from both sides of the family.

Despite the tragic loss of a loved one, some people started playing the blame game. They stared and talked to Aditya as if he were at fault. Though, except for a few, the crowd was unaware that Prisha had recently been unwell.

Seeing so many unfamiliar faces would have piqued Aarav's curiosity, but he refrained from asking questions.

On the other side, Aditya saw familiar faces for Aarav, including his friends and Vyom. He found the courage to tell his son about Mumma.

He tightly hugged his son and said, "Son (Beta), Mumma has passed away." Aarav's eyes wailed with tears as he realised, she was no more. He frantically looked once at his mother.

Aarav, after seeing Prisha, clutched his father tightly and shouted the single word, "Daddy!" He let out a piercing scream as he experienced the worst pain he had ever felt.

When Aarav screamed, his entire body shook as if his soul were shaken. Aditya hugged him tightly to pacify him.

On the other side, Dadau gathered the children around him and played with them to distract them from the traumatic

event. Aarav was a pampered child; he needed much attention.

Apart from Prisha's parents, society continued with its commentaries while Prisha lay on her deathbed, and a once happy family was destroyed.

The gossipers were present, as was the norm in society, spreading rumours all around.

Despite being on her deathbed, Prisha's face radiated a divine glow that could never be seen on a normal person's face in their entire life. Her face reflected a life of honesty, integrity, kindness, purity, and sanity. She still looked like a charming girl, it felt like she would laugh, and a dimple would form on her cheeks.

No one could match the unique charm of the angelic radiance adorning Prisha's face.

Aditya mourned alone, without consolation, only hearing whispered abuse from the crowd.

On the other hand, people gathered in enormous crowds to show you they were more troubled than anyone else. The crowd's murmurs, comments, and exchanges against Aditya were audible to him.

Aditya's father, who valued education and had always been cheerful, could only imagine a bleak future for his son. Despite facing financial difficulties, he had always strived to

provide the best education for his children, and he succeeded.

He had the utmost respect for the bond between Aditya and Prisha. He always felt proud when he spoke about his daughter-in-law.

A father's pride in his son and daughter-in-law is one of life's greatest gifts; his father was fortunate enough to receive it from them. His father mourned the destruction of the once a happy family.

Prisha's father was the tallest and most handsome member of the family. Despite the turmoil in his life, he never lost his cheerful disposition and charming smile. All loved him for his generosity, kindness, and easy-going nature.

Their dads were best friends for as long as anyone could remember. They had faced many of life's challenges together and always maintained a positive outlook, relying on each other's support.

Prisha's father was the saddest person in the room today, although he couldn't show it. The intense suffering had left him frozen. He couldn't accept what had happened. The time he had spent caring for his daughter seemed to be lost. Prisha was gone.

Today, he prepared himself to offer his shoulder to his beloved daughter. He was shattered, unable to even cry. His

face showed the pain he was feeling. Prisha's father was a caring man. This was a severe setback for him.

Losing their beloved daughter was a devastating blow to the entire family.

Prisha was the most charming of all her siblings and cousins. Her beauty was unmatched. Even on her deathbed, she exuded a charm and radiance that no one, alive or dead, could match.

In the past, Prisha's mother had always been observed with a broad smile on her face. She was beautiful, and she had a beautiful voice. She was known for her soft-heartedness and would have reprimanded no one her entire life.

She had done a wonderful job as a mother and had brought up a pretty daughter with care. When she sang, the world stopped, but today, her screams and sobs were melting hearts.

She called out Prisha's name, but her daughter would not respond. Tears streamed down her face as she mourned.

Prisha's mother couldn't stop crying as she suffered the greatest loss, feeling indescribable pain. On the other hand, her father hid his emotions, but the anguish was in his heart.

Aditya's whole family, including his brothers, sisters, and cousins, constantly wailed. Also, Prisha's siblings cried and remained shocked.

Someone in the crowd questioned Aditya. "Didn't you take her to see a doctor?"

A voice from the crowd asked, "Didn't you give her medicines on time?"

Aditya replied mournfully, "We followed the doctor's prescribed medicines. But it seemed like they were ineffective."

"We were considering seeing another doctor, and amid that, my world collapsed."

The crowd asked, "How could she have passed away at such a young age?" "She was only 34?"

However, some people in both families' crowds acted strangely, which was unexplainable. Their exaggerated behaviour was visible, and it was odd.

Amid all the chaos, someone in the crowd was so jealous that they made inappropriate remarks. She said, "Prisha's brother shall do the last rites!"

However, Prisha's parents and siblings remained calm and didn't believe any rumours or ill-will. They did not respond to any provocation at all.

Aditya led the preparation for the last rites for her beloved wife with filled eyes.

As soon as he applied makeup, Prisha looked stunning. Her entire face glowed. She had calmness on her face. She still

looked sweet. Aditya kissed her on her forehead before covering her face!

Everyone was fascinated by the heavenly glow on her face!

Meanwhile, A person in the crowd suggested, "We should analyse the reports and investigate the prescription details."

"Let's go to the hospital where she was admitted."

Aditya heard everything but held his head high, determined to stay strong, knowing that Prisha always wanted him to be strong and never give up. No matter how hard life may get.

Aditya had a wave of thoughts. "The crowd was free to do anything they wanted, but why was it happening in front of his wife?"

"Was that the right time for everything?"

Aditya remembered the times they visited Gorakhpur together. Their in-laws lived within a three-kilometre radius of each other. They would usually stop at her in-laws' house first.

Prisha would call her dad beforehand to ensure he dropped everything and immediately came over to meet her. Whenever her dad arrived, she would glance at him briefly, and then she engaged herself. It was a tradition they always followed whenever they visited there. Her father would always arrive within an hour. Though they kept in touch over the phone, both remained eager to see each other.

Aditya's father would always be home when they visited their hometown. Also, people would take breaks from their workdays to spend time with them.

This was an unspoken affection from their families for them. It was love in its purest form, undimmed by anything else.

Unfortunately, everything was ruined.

Despite the rumour mongers, whispered abuse, Aditya did not react to any of them.

Finally, it was time for Prisha's last journey. The funeral procession made its way through the streets.

Under Hindu custom, Aditya carried out the last rites.

***THE PLEASANT VOYAGE OF LIFE RAN INTO
TYPHON, TEARING THE VOYAGE INTO PIECES.***

CHAPTER - VII

Nitish returned to work after a break. He caught up with his friends Naina, Ankit, and Kush and shared everything.

They all prayed for Prisha and agreed to visit Aditya once he returned.

For Aarav, this was the greatest tragedy.

Aditya knew the pain of losing a mother since he had experienced it when he was twenty. Aarav would miss the warmth and care of a mother.

Aarav and Prisha were very close. As a child, Aarav preferred her company over Aditya's. Prisha was the perfect mother, always caring for every aspect of Aarav's life, from his health and environment to his diet and education. Prisha worked as a teacher at the same school that Aarav attended.

He rarely spent a day without his mom by his side. But then, everything had changed now.

It had been two days since the tragedy. The rituals in Aditya's native were yet to be finished as per Hindu Tradition.

Meanwhile, Aditya was still fielding questions like: "How did it happen?" "When did it happen?" "Which medical professional did you see? "Does it happen in the hospital?" "Was she getting treatment or not?" "Was she rushed to the hospital?"

Despite all this, Aditya noticed Aarav was playing happily.

Aarav ran to catch his cousin. "Catch... catch, if you can?" Rocky said it loudly while gasping.

Rocky and Aarav were cousins. Rocky, the older one, was a handsome guy with a cute face and a slightly darker complexion. Despite the age gap of three years, these two became friends quickly.

Though they met after two years, Aditya witnessed a remarkable bond between the two kids. Aarav mixed up with people and seemed to have forgotten the loss he had experienced two days ago.

Aarav commanded in a stern tone, "Slow down, or I will not play with you."

Rocky, panting heavily, replied, "Okay, okay, catch me if you can!" as he continued running fast.

Aarav then turned to his father and cried, "Daddy, tell Rocky to slow down, please!"

Aditya told Rocky, "Son, can you please slow down?"

"If you don't, Aarav will start crying." As if reading Aditya's mind, Rocky blinked his eyes and said, "Okay, Mama (maternal uncle)."

Finally, Aarav caught Rocky and declared with a bright disposition, "Ha! I got you!"

Aarav skipped around with joy and excitement, exclaiming, "Yes, yes!"

He then invited his friend Rocky to play 'hide and seek'.

And the next game started.

"First, I'll count to ten, and then you can hide," Aarav instructed Rocky.

He then snuggled up to his father, closing his eyes while resting his face on his dad's thighs. "1, 2, 3, 4...10!"

Aarav announced, "Here I come!"

Aarav searched every place for hiding. He said each time he tried, "You are here." "No. " Not here." "I couldn't track him down."

Aarav gave a shot in the restroom, saying, "Hey, you are here." "Oh no", he hasn't shown up."

Aarav searched high and low in Grandpa's room but couldn't find Rocky.

Undeterred, Aarav checked the other rooms, hoping to find his friend hiding there. "Hey, you're here," he exclaimed, but Rocky was not found again.

After several failed attempts, Aarav ran to his father and cried, "Daddy, help me! I can't find Rocky anywhere."

Aditya joined the search and found Rocky together.

Aarav was overjoyed to find his friend and leapt up, hugging his father while exclaiming, "Yes, yes!" "I won."

Aditya tried to gauge if Aarav was hiding his emotions too?

Aarav had so much fun playing with Rocky that he even forgot to eat breakfast.

Soon, another kid, Robin, joined them.

Robin, a three-year-old kid, was too cute and talkative. Whenever he woke up, he eagerly joined Aarav and Rocky to play with them. He enjoyed making loud noises that only he could understand when he played on his bicycle and scooter. Robin's playful energy kept the entire family busy, and they adored him.

Robin ran up to Aarav and grabbed him, exclaiming, "I caught you, Aarav Bhaiya (brother)!"

After a moment of confusion, Aarav laughed and said, "We're playing 'Hide & Seek,' not 'Run & Catch' Robin!"

Aarav then went to his father, Aditya, and chuckled, "Daddy, Robin thought we were playing a 'Run & Catch' game. He ran up to me and yelled, 'I caught you, Bhaiya (brother)!'"

Aarav chuckled and told his father, "Robin doesn't know the difference between the games. He's so small!"

Aditya made him understand, "That's right! Aarav. Robin is four years younger than you and too young to understand the game's rules.

With a warm smile, Aditya encouraged Aarav to play. So, the three boys formed a team and began playing together.

Although Aarav appeared to have forgotten the tragic event, but is it so? Is it possible? Only that little kid knew.

Their game continued for the entire time.

As Aditya watched Aarav play happily with the other children, he prayed silently, "May my son always be happy!"

Aditya couldn't shake the picture of Aarav's happiness from his mind, and he thought to himself, "What if I keep one more kid with me?"

As soon as Aditya had the thought of keeping another kid, he felt relieved, thinking, "It will ease Aarav's loneliness and shock after his mother's absence." He knew Aarav was

deeply attached to his mother and expected him to feel shattered.

At this moment, Aditya had an epiphany, "Who will give his kids to him?" as he and his son would now live alone at home.

Despite the challenges, he couldn't think beyond Aarav's happiness. The image of Aarav's chuckling face with two broken front teeth stuck in his mind.

While Vyom and his father discussed various rituals, Aditya entered the room. He said, "Papa, I think having another kid to keep with me. It would make Aarav happy, and he wouldn't feel lonely."

His father responded, "But who will take care of the other child? "It would be challenging for you to care for one child, and you want another. Parenting alone is a tough task, son."

In a choked voice, Father asked, "Do you think you can handle another kid?"

Aditya replied, "Yes, I'll do anything for Aarav."

"Papa, please see how happy he is playing with Rocky and Robin. Aarav needs company. Otherwise, he may go into shock living alone with me. Or, I will have to quit my job and stay here."

"I'm scared he'll be shattered living alone."

"I don't know what to do."

Aditya revealed his idea to Vyom, "Brother, Prisha was his best friend. Aarav can't bear losing his Mumma. Once I reach Greater Noida, he will feel lonely and shocked."

Aditya repeatedly told Vyom, "I fear how Aarav will live alone the entire day." "The thought of leaving him home alone while I go to the office makes me sick. This thought is giving me a lot of anxiety."

Vyom agreed with Aditya and was prompted with another idea, "Aditya, I recalled that Prisha was dropping him off in a creche. What if he goes there?"

Aditya replied, "Yes, Vyom, you are right. Leaving him in the creche could be a temporary solution, but it won't be easy for him because he will have to stay till 8 PM as compared to 3 PM previously."

"He will miss me the entire day."

Vyom offered words of encouragement, "Don't worry, I'll come with you and stay for as long as you need." Aditya felt momentary relief, but the question remained, how long would his elder brother stay?

It was morning on February 11, 2021. Aditya and Vyom walked into the building's lobby, discussing various topics. Soon, their father joined them.

The father said, "Aditya, I realised you were thinking right. It is good to have another kid."

Father asked, "But the problem is, who will give their kid?"

"Do you know anyone near your home who could stay there?"

Aditya thought and replied, "No, I don't have anyone in my contacts, but I'll try to explore."

He kept pondering over everyone he knew, and everyone on his contact list who had kids.

After considering his options, Aditya called Nitish.

He said, "I wish to return to work and take care of Aarav in the best way possible."

"I have noticed the kids understand the frequency and company of other kids well. I feel the best way is to have another kid with me. That way, Aarav won't be lonely, and both kids can grow up together, playing, fighting, and keeping each other's company."

"And it's good to impart education to any kid."

"If I don't ensure company for Aarav, I may not return until he's grown up. I'm worried that it will be terrible for him if he stays with me alone."

Sensing Aditya was feeling down, Nitish reassured him, "Don't worry. I currently live in rented accommodations. You can count on me not to leave you alone."

"Either I can move closer to your home to help you, or you can move closer to mine so my family can assist you."

"I don't know why, Nitish, but I'm losing hope when I see Aarav," Aditya said. "I was never such a light-hearted person."

"Thank you for your support, Nitish, but I won't move anywhere. Aarav has suffered a significant loss."

"He will be happy with the friends in our society," Aditya replied.

Nitish said, "Okay, so having another kid is a better idea."
"Let's explore it,"

Aditya approached his father and asked, "What about Rocky? He's Surbhi's son (Aditya's elder sister)."

Surbhi, Aditya's elder sister, had three sons: Saaras (14), Rocky (10), and Vayu (3).

"How old is he, Papa?" Aditya asked.

"He's ten years old, so he won't be able to stay there," the father answered.

Aditya nodded. "Right, he's too young to come."

Suddenly, another name stuck in his mind, and he asked, "What about Saaras, Rocky's elder brother?"

"He's older," Aditya said. "He should be at least 14 now. He'll be perfect."

"But what about his education and upbringing?" Aditya's father asked him. "Can you handle both?"

"I'll do anything for Aarav to save him from loneliness and neglect," Aditya promised. "I'll figure things out gradually."

His father repeated his question. "Aditya, I suggest you consider it once more. Is it the right decision?"

Turning to Vyom, his father asked, "What do you think about Aditya's idea?"

Vyom replied, "Let's take some time to deliberate on it."

Aditya and Vyom discussed the matter further. Aditya finally said to his father, "Yes, Papa, I don't have any other choice."

"I have only two options. Option one is that I'll stay here, quitting my job until I am confident there will be no effect on my son. And he grows up. "

"The second option is to keep another kid along and return to work."

Vyom told his father, "I can accompany you for a few days. But in the long run, you need to manage yourself."

After some thought, Vyom said, "Let's try for Saaras."

Aditya's dad said. "Let's reach out to Surbhi for Saaras."

Aditya's dad sought reassurance from Vyom, and entire family and close friends, and then he called Surbhi.

Father said, "Beta (Son), Aditya, and Vyom were suggesting that if we get the support of Saaras, Aarav will have company."

Surbhi answered, "What, Papa? I didn't get you."

Father said, "We wish Saaras to go with Aditya, and he'll take care of him for his living and education."

Surbhi told her father, "Papa, Saaras is small. Will he be ready to live an entire day with Aarav alone?"

Aditya's father asked, "Is he in 8th grade and now fourteen years old?"

"Yes, Papa, he is fourteen now," Surbhi replied.

Finally, mustering the courage, Father said, "Beta (son), Saaras is old enough."

"Children at this age are adaptable and can thrive in various environments."

"Papa, it is okay with me. Please discuss this with Saaras's dad," Surbhi said.

"Yes, certainly I will do it." But first, I wish to know if you are comfortable sending Saaras or not." Father asked.

"I believe in Aditya. If he says so, he will do his best, for sure. He will take good care of him," Surbhi replied.

Father said, "Okay, Beta, let me speak to Saaras's dad."

Aditya's father ended his call, turned to Aditya and Vyom, and said, "Surbhi is okay with it and willing to let Saaras go with Aditya. We must talk to Saaras's father (Neel) and grandfather."

Next, Aditya's father dialled Neel and asked, "I want to see you, son." "Where can we meet?"

Neel asked, "Would you like to visit us?"

Aditya's father thought momentarily and replied, "Okay, I'll come."

It was February 11, 2021, at 1 PM.

As summer drew closer, the cold was losing its grip. After several days of dense fog, the sky suddenly turned blue. The day's temperature was 25 degrees Celsius.

Aditya, his dad, and Vyom drove to Surbhi's house.

They press the call button after reaching Surbhi's home, "Call bell sound..."

From inside the house, Surbhi called out, "Wait, I'm coming." She quickly unlocked the door to let them in.

They were settled in the family room shortly.

Aditya was deep in speculation about how to streamline things and plan a way forward.

Saaras's father and grandpa were aware of the agenda of the meeting. They deliberated about sending Saaras with Aditya as they sat in the living room.

Suddenly, Saaras's grandfather asked, "Who will cook the meal?"

Aditya replied, "We have a maid who has been working for over four years. She comes in the morning, afternoon, and evening."

Then, Saaras's father raised safety concerns and asked, "What about safety?" "Is your place safe for keeping kids alone the entire day?"

Aditya replied, "We do have security guards on duty around the clock." "They will not let you in without verifying the apartment number."

Aditya felt nervous about the safety issue, as they had never left Aarav alone, but he didn't want to show his lack of confidence to anyone.

Hearing what appeared to be a serious exchange, Surbhi chimed in, "It's teatime, Aditya, brother, don't worry too much. You are giving off a very tense vibe."

Aditya smiled and said, "Never."

Aditya took a bite out of Samosa and sipped coffee, along with everyone else in the room.

Suddenly, Aditya had an idea and said, "I am planning to install CCTV cameras inside and outside the apartment and connect them to my phone to monitor the kids from anywhere."

Saaras's grandfather had another valid concern. "Your job is far from home, and you work long hours. Can you spend quality time with kids?"

He asked, "Who will take care of the kids in your absence?"

Aditya didn't reply this time and nodded, "Hmm."

Aditya continued, "I will manage everything." "Saaras is my most trusted person to accompany Aarav."

Reiterating his commitment, Aditya said, "Have faith in me. I won't let any of the kids go through hard times. I'll take care of both of them, enrol Saaras in a good school, and cover his entire expenses for as long as he wants to study. But at this moment, I don't know exactly how I will manage."

In Aditya's mind, only one image kept replaying: Aarav's smiling face with two front broken teeth, forgetting the recent tragedy.

Aditya was lost in thought but remained silent, thinking, "Everything is manageable if one wishes to manage. I can handle this situation well. Aarav is my responsibility. He has to be unaffected."

Surbhi noticed Aditya's persistent willingness and interrupted, "Let's discuss this further later."

Aditya agreed, "Okay."

Then, Aditya's father said, "Allow us to leave, as we are to meet Pandit Ji for ongoing rituals."

While Saaras's dad and grandpa were discussing, Surbhi came out to see off her father and brothers. She said, "Don't worry, Aditya. Everything will be okay."

"You might find another way out. Don't lose hope. Trust god!"

Surbhi knew that the decision regarding Saaras was not hers alone. They lived in a joint family with many decision-makers, including his grandfather, uncles, and aunties.

Aditya and his father, with Vyom, left for home in the afternoon to attend an organised ritual.

Today was another sunny day with steadily increasing temperatures.

Aditya carried out the day's scheduled activities.

Meanwhile, Saaras's parents and grandfather shared their thoughts with the rest of the family and senior citizens of society. They pondered the request made to them.

Someone in the society pointed out, "Is it possible for Aditya to manage both Saaras and Aarav? If he feels up to it, let him

take on the responsibilities."

The other people in society said, "Men have limitations in managing homes. It seems like a preposterous task and not a workable solution."

"It's not feasible for a man to handle everything alone." "If you try to manage everything, you'll become mad, and it will negatively impact your health."

Someone who learned about this idea remarked, "The cost of education in NCR is also very high. Can he afford it alone?"

However, some members of society had different points of view. They argued that people could not raise their kids with both parents earning and being physically available. But how was this guy ready to keep both kids with him? They saw it as an impractical strategy that was expected to be a fiasco soon.

As the day passed, Aditya couldn't stop thinking about Saaras and the possibility of taking care of him, along with Aarav. He knew it would be tough, but he was determined to make it work.

Again, Surbhi discussed this with the family and expressed her point of view.

Surbhi and Neel always believed in Aditya and said to his family, "If Aditya is committing to this, he will undoubtedly make it happen." "I do not doubt him."

"Rest. It's up to you, people, to decide what to do."

"Should we inform him no, or yes?"

Saaras's grandpa suggested thinking carefully before responding.

Aditya was and will always be obliged for his entire life to whoever cared for Aarav, even for a single moment (all his siblings and their families, his sister-in-law and friends, Aarav's maternal family, or anyone else).

Aditya carried out Prisha's rituals as per tradition, and Aarav spent the day having fun with Rocky and Robin. Whenever Aarav got thirsty after playing, he happily came to Aditya to drink water, otherwise, he was too busy.

It was late at night. Aditya reflected on the tasks that Aarav could handle independently as part of his routine and the ones he would need to learn for a smooth life.

As he lay in bed, clutching Aarav close to him, he made a mental inventory of the tasks:

"Can Aarav brush himself? Yes," Aditya thought to himself.

But then he reflected, "What about taking a bath? Can Aarav do that? No."

He continued, "Can he wipe himself after a bath? No. Can Aarav dress? No."

Aditya further pondered, "Can Aarav change his clothes after returning from school? Doubtful. He can remove his clothes, but will he wear them?"

"Does Aarav eat by himself?"

"Can Aarav study by himself?"

"Can Aarav tie his shoelaces?" "No."

"Can Aarav put on his socks?" "No."

"Can Aarav take off his socks and shoes?" "Yes."

He felt anxious, thinking, "I would prepare him in the morning, but I can't be there when he returns home."

"I'll be in the office when he returns."

Although it was a momentary relief for a few more months as schools ran online because of COVID restrictions.

Aditya was troubled and unable to sleep, while Aarav dozed off in his arms from exhaustion. He pondered how to make Aarav more comfortable and fall asleep after some time.

The next day, Surbhi called Aditya, and she said, "Aditya, we all discussed, and there are conflicting opinions. Some suggest letting Saaras go along with you, while others suggest differently. I don't understand what the final decision should be."

Aditya replied to Surbhi, "No worries, I appreciate you trying to find a solution. Let's see. There will be a way for sure."

Meanwhile, Aditya had to leave the city for an urgent task in Delhi, along with Aarav and Vyom. He finished his work in

two days and returned to Gorakhpur for the remaining rituals.

And he continued to search for a kid as planned.

The day came on the last day of the ritual for Prisha.

Everyone was invited.

Surbhi and Neel also joined the rituals along with other guests, friends, relatives, and senior members of the society. They met Aditya and said, "Brother, we don't think it's a feasible idea to keep Saaras along with you, but if you are firm with your plans, we will allow you to have Saaras along."

"Aditya, you must take care of him well," Surbhi said.

Aditya thanked them and then thanked everyone. He folded his hands to show his gratitude.

Aditya completed the rituals. And he called Nitish, saying, "Hi, I am coming with Aarav and Saaras, along with Vyom, to help us out for some days."

Nitish replied, "You just reach here."

"My wife gave me an unconditional go-ahead as long as you want me at your home."

"I have kept my bag ready. I'll also come to your home and stay until you want me to. You just reach here."

"We are all eagerly waiting for you," Nitish said before hanging up.

After the call, Nitish fell silent!

Once he regained his composure, Nitish informed all his friends and colleagues about Aditya's plans.

They were relieved to know the plan and waited for Aditya to arrive!

"Life is like a Voyage, full of twists and turns and unexpected storms. It can be smooth sailing for a while, but when a typhoon hits it, everything changes."

A mother's journey came to an end, and with it, so many things ended too. It felt like all the love and care deserved was swept away by the winds. All the dreams, plans, and cherished moments were shattered in an instant.

But even amidst the chaos, there was a silver lining. "Voyage of life is a journey that brings both good and bad moments. The people we encounter may be good or bad, but it's up to us to live responsibly and make the most of the voyage." We couldn't control the weather, but we could control how we respond to it.

For even when the skies are grey, the sun is always shining beyond the clouds.

"Life is a voyage, and we are sailors."

OCTOBER 2022

CHAPTER - VIII

Today, in October 2022, the city was flooded with shoppers looking for gifts to exchange during the Diwali festival at the end of the month. The markets were crowded, starkly contrasting the past few months and the previous year.

The scorching summer had finally ended, and the weather had become pleasant.

People in the NCR were gradually seen without masks as the impact of COVID was felt nowhere.

However, people were concerned about the air quality in the upcoming days, similar to every year at this time.

Today, Aditya was yet to reach the office as he felt less energetic because of the everyday marathon that he takes commuting to work.

Nitish was always punctual, as he used to be in his role as a project head all the time. As he entered the office, he placed his thumbs on the biometric attendance reader, which responded with a "Ting sound, thank you."

Naina lived close to the office, which made her easily accessible and seldom late.

Well, everyone was in the office at their respective workstations, except for a few.

Naina just finished a call and walked towards the office entrance, where Aditya came rushing in to reach the attendance reader.

"Damn, I'm already late," Aditya muttered.

Naina noticed Aditya rushing in and chimed in. "Hey, why are you so rushed?"

Aditya responded in a low tone, "Naina, I have a tightly packed morning schedule."

Naina realised she had asked the wrong question upon hearing Aditya's reply in a stressed tone. Also, she had an idea about how busy his schedule was in the morning. And she grew curious.

Naina asked, "Let's have coffee if you are less occupied."

Aditya nodded, went to his workstation, and called Naina on the intercom. He said, "Hey, I received an important email I need to respond to. I'll catch up with you later for coffee."

Naina responded, "No problem at all."

Just then, Kush entered the office with a sweet box.

In the office, whenever someone brought sweets, they gave them to the pantry boy, who then distributed them to everyone, or they could place sweets in the cafeteria with a brief message such as "Happiness to Share."

But Kush went to each seat, cabin, and conference room and offered sweets himself. He wore a beaming smile and seemed exceptionally happy, unlike anyone had ever seen him.

People asked while picking sweets from the box, "Hey! What is this sweet for?"

Kush grinned and replied, "I will tell you later."

Kush had a supportive group of friends at work with whom he could confide about his life experiences without fear of judgement.

After sharing sweets with everyone, he went to Naina and said, "Please take two without worrying about your dieting now."

Naina exclaimed, "Oh! Do you want me to gain weight? You are my enemy!" "I will take only one piece!"

Kush grinned and replied, "No issues, though I don't have any such motives for you, my dear."

Although Kush finished all the sweets, he chose not to share the reason behind his gesture.

The day progressed, and everyone became busy with their work.

Soon, people forget the reason for the sweets and Kush's happiness, except for Naina. She felt puzzled why he didn't share the reason for the sweets.

Though she was working, she found it hard to resist the urge to know the secret. But she was afraid that it might be something upsetting, like when he threw a party for being sick or having a headache in the past.

Despite her confusion, she could tell from Kush's expression that it wasn't a catastrophic event this time.

Finally, she went to the finance department, gestured towards Kush, and asked, "Okay, now can you tell me? What were those sweets for?"

"Did you get promoted?"

Kush shook his head and said, "Nope."

Naina laughed and asked, "Did a girl see you? Maybe that's why you're celebrating. Was she prettier than me?"

Everyone laughed at Naina's taunting comment, and the whole place echoed with laughter!

Meanwhile, Kush replied, "Naina, I'm throwing a party!"

Naina asked, "Where is the venue?"

Kush replied, "Our favourite, "Really Bad."

Naina said, "Really Bad?" That's not a suitable place for a party, Kush. Why don't you try some other place?"

Kush shrugged and replied, "Let me try to change the venue, though I have already invited everyone there, but don't worry, let me try to see other places."

Naina hesitated but eventually agreed. "Fine, let me know the final venue, and I'll try to make it wherever it is."

Naina left Kush's place feeling bewildered about why he wasn't sharing the reason for the celebration.

Everyone got engaged in the regular work.

Meanwhile, Naina's intercom rang, and she answered. "Hi, this is Naina."

Aditya, on the other end, said, "Let's have coffee."

Naina was surprised and asked, "Where? At Chaayos?"

Aditya replied, "No, some other time in Chaayos. Our cafeteria is okay for now."

(Chaayos, a tea café was some steps ahead of the office premise.) Credit: Sunshine teahouse Pvt. Ltd.)

Aditya and Naina made it to the cafeteria within ten minutes. After Naina grabbed a table and set her phone down, she

made her way to the coffee dispensers to pour herself a cup of coffee. On the other hand, Aditya headed to the dispenser and asked Naina, "Can you grab a green tea bag for me, please?"

"Of course," Naina replied. She fetched a green tea bag for Aditya and returned to her table.

They settled down and started discussing work-related topics and some friendly banter.

Naina asked, "Aditya, what do you think about Kush? I assume Kush is going to marry. I mean engaged."

Aditya nodded and said, "Maybe, but we should wait for him to share."

Naina agreed. "Anyway, I was just curious and guessed."

Naina and Aditya sat at the tea table and continued their discussion.

Naina was curious about how Aarav was doing after seeing Aditya rushing in the morning. She thought it might be too personal, but she asked anyway.

Naina asked, "Hey, how is Aarav doing nowadays?"

Aditya smiled and replied, "Aarav is doing well, and thanks for asking. He's growing up so fast."

A quick glimpse of Aarav stuck in his mind as he said, "Naina, Aarav told me his first joke a few days ago."

Naina exclaimed, "Is he such a big boy that he cracks jokes?"

"That's adorable. It's great to see him growing."

Aditya further added, "I feel he learns jokes for me. Also, Aarav is becoming talkative these days. Just a few days ago, he was asked to change seats in class because he was repeatedly talking. I feel he is becoming more expressive."

"A few days ago, Aarav wrote his first exam paper. Last year, it was an online exam because of COVID restrictions, and before that, he was too young."

"Aarav is getting naughtier, but watching him grow into his own person is a joy."

Naina smiled and said, "That's great news, Aditya. It's always heart-warming to see kids enjoying their childhood to the fullest."

"I'm so glad to know he is happy and carefree."

The two of them continued their conversation about their families, work, and other matters, enjoying the peaceful atmosphere of the cafeteria.

Naina's phone rang with the sound of "Tring, Tring, Tring."

"Excuse me, Aditya, it's an urgent call," Naina said in a husky voice as she answered the phone.

She then walked out of the cafeteria.

Aditya remained at the table and filled his mug with hot water before heading towards his work department.

The day progressed, and around 1:30 p.m., people gathered in the ground-floor lobby for their post-lunch stroll. Instead of taking the elevator, many preferred to walk down the stairs. Among them were Aditya and Nitish, who were discussing a strange incident that had happened with a client earlier.

While they strolled and talked, Naina joined them. She had a constant smile on her face.

Nitish noticed her cheerful demeanour, and he asked, "Hey, you are constantly beaming with a smile. What's cooking up?"

Naina answered, "I just got a call from Piyush. Ah, my brother is happy!"

"Finally! He has planned to take an extended family vacation over the Diwali holiday. He has outperformed this year and has learned to manage himself. Thanks to regular medication and the winning attitude, he now relishes the biggest challenges of his life."

Naina smiled and said, "We always stand by each other through thick and thin."

Aditya said, "I am glad to hear that your brother is doing well."

Nitish nodded, and he said, "Naina, I am glad to hear it."

The three strolled into the lobby, enjoying each other's company and discussing various topics.

Aditya added, "It takes courage to endure pain to live a better tomorrow. The survivor and his family deserve praise. Survivor is unquestionably the real hero because he has endured terrible suffering."

"By the way, where is their vacation destination?"

Naina answered, "They are aiming for somewhere in southern India this time. I don't know the exact location."

Naina experienced emotion and prayed, "Thank you so much, God!" She looked up at the sky with numb eyes. "You are the most powerful!"

Aditya and Nitish expressed their joy for Naina's brother.

As they moved from one end of the corridor to the other, the crowd grew larger as most people came for a stroll after lunch, as was customary during this period. For a thirty-minute lunch break, people typically spend 10-15 minutes on the meal and the rest of the time walking.

Today, as Naina and the others walked, she spotted Ankit walking down the corridor from a different direction with a smile. He still needed to join them.

Upon seeing him, Naina called out and waved to him, "Hey, Ankit, come join us!"

Ankit spotted them and made his way over to join them, "Hey guys, what's up?" He greeted everyone.

They continued their stroll down the corridor.

Ankit's smile hinted he had something interesting to share, and he seemed to wait for one of them to ask him about it.

However, everyone remained silent as they continued walking.

After walking silently for some time, Nitish finally asked Ankit, "What's the matter? You have such a big smile that it looks like you're laughing."

Ankit laughed, saying, "My buddies Sophia and Sushant are a unique couple, that's for sure."

"They have turned their relationship into an excessively romantic one. They have been dating for two years and caring for their relationship well."

"Sophia has been visiting India and staying for three months until her visa expires, and Sushant has been following the same pattern alternately."

Naina exclaimed, "WOW! Good to hear it."

"I feel they have been listening to each other only rather than the entire world."

Ankit continued, "They attempted to convince their family to accept the marriage, but Sushant's father was not ready, so they planned to go ahead without him."

"In their love story, Sushant's father remained the main villain."

"A long-lasting relationship, which is increasingly rare nowadays, is something Sushant's father values. It was completely missing in their relationship, according to him."

"Sophia and Sushant took an appointment for marriage with the Marriage Registrar for the upcoming month."

"Since it is a special case. It will be a registered marriage in India after getting clearance from the embassies. The legal process has already begun."

"Sushant's mother and a few relatives agreed to their marriage. But his father opposed it and decided to boycott it. His father even warned them not to enter his home."

"Yet Sushant's plan was not affected."

"I'm glad to hear it," Nitish said with a smile.

Now, Ankit laughed loudly and said, "They are planning to marry crazily."

"What do you mean?" Naina asked, as she was slightly surprised to hear Ankit's way of calling them crazy.

"I mean, what's so crazy about getting married?"

Ankit grinned and said, "So, it's going to be a four-month process."

"They will marry four times, each time on the second Saturday of the month."

Naina was puzzled hearing to Ankit, and she asked, "It's bouncing from my head. Can you elaborate?"

"Okay, let me explain to you," Ankit said as he stopped laughing.

"They'll wed four times."

Ankit continued, "According to the lawyer's advice, they will first register the marriage with the marriage registrar as soon as they have the date, and then they have planned to have their first wedding ceremony according to Hindu culture."

"The Second Wedding will be held following Christian culture in the following month."

"The Third Wedding will follow Muslim culture in yet another month."

"And finally, they will have a fourth wedding ceremony per Sikh tradition."

They all laughed together and echoed, "Oh, my god! Really Crazy!"

Naina mentioned, "Sophia is too crazy!"

Ankit replied, "Both are equally mad."

"Wow! Ankit, that's really awesome!" Naina exclaimed.
"Your friend is terrific!"

"Do people have enough free time to attend their weddings four times?" Nitish thought and questioned.

Ankit laughed as he quipped, "Who is mandatory in the marriage?"

"Oh, I see," laughed Nitish and Naina, and they echoed, "The Bride and Groom."

Wow!" Naina exclaimed.

Ankit responded, "In fact, they've planned differently. They've planned to invite friends in the first marriage, close relatives in another, and a mix of friends and family in the third. Last, the leftover people in the fourth marriage."

"The registration of marriage will need only witnesses and close family members."

Ankit continued, "Sophia attended various Indian marriages in diverse cultures and found the marriage ceremonies fantastic, filled with dancing and celebrations. "

"She had seen nothing like it before. Sophia was amused throughout every ceremony, and they decided to have their own wedding in a unique way."

Naina smiled and said, "It sounds like they're making the most of it, and it's beautiful."

Nitish nodded in agreement and threw his sarcastic comment, "Are they attempting to break records for marrying?"

They all laughed at Nitish's remark, and continued to move.

Naina asked, "Does anyone know about Kush's treat this morning?" but there was complete silence in response.

Soon, lunchtime got over, and the hallway crowd gradually dispersed. The second half of the day started.

While working, Kush realised he had forgotten to invite Aditya to his party, so he quickly reached out to him and said, "Hey Aditya, I'm throwing a party and sponsoring the whole thing. You're invited!" "Sorry for the late invitation. I forgot in the morning rush."

Aditya replied, "That's great. Count me in for sure."

Aditya asked, "Where is the venue?"

While leaving the place, Kush replied, "Really Bad."

Amid the sound of discussions in the office and the lively activities of the cafeteria, the second half of the office hours started in full swing. The fragrance of roses was still present. Today's fragrance lingered for a long time, and the pleasant weather made it mesmerising.

Naina sat attentively in a chaotic internal review meeting. She jotted down the details of the project and put forward her input. Then, she promised to share the detailed plan by the evening and left the meeting.

Quickly logging into her computer, she retrieved the data and started drafting the response to a query.

Just then, Kush approached Naina's seat and said, "I'm sorry, Naina, I cannot change the venue for tonight. Our venue is 'Really Bad.'"

"Wow! That's a good choice," Naina exclaimed.

"Thanks. And I'm sure everyone is going to love it because it's on the ground floor of this building," Kush said.

The day had been exciting for Naina.

As she finished her work around the end of the day, her curious mind wandered, and she speculated about Kush's party. But she did not arrive at any conclusion.

The day of, everyone in the office remained quite busy.

CHAPTER -IX

The clock struck six in the evening.

As the sun slowly descended on the horizon, the sky transformed into deep purple, providing the perfect backdrop for a party time at "Really Bad." on the first floor of a corporate tower. This pub was easily accessible to everyone.

"Really Bad" mostly played music and videos on a huge 6ft x 10ft video wall, with occasional live music performances. It was the perfect escape from the outside world.

The pub in Gurgaon had a smart approach to keep the party going without disturbing the peace. They switched to Indian and Punjabi music after 10 p.m. - a move that helped prevent any potential noise disturbances and nuisances. Also, they followed timing to ensure compliance by law enforcement agencies.

Nitish and Kush hit the door and entered the pub, 'Really Bad'. It was enveloped in a warm, dim light that made it exciting place for the party. Hollywood songs and videos played on the walls at a moderate volume - loud enough to uplift the spirit but not so loud that you couldn't hold a conversation. As the night approached, the volume of music would gradually increase, adding to the energy of the place.

The beauties around were stunning this time around. With such a lively and vibrant atmosphere, Nitish and Kush felt too excited.

In two corners were low-height sofas, while in the centre were chest-height joinable tables and tall chairs for quickly catching your glass after getting up from the seat and going mad after the pegs.

Nitish and Kush grabbed a joinable table and made themselves comfortable.

The round-shaped DJ lights flashed rapidly, flickering in different colours in tune with the music. The well-synchronised DJ lights enhanced the party spirit of the people.

As the night would go on, the crowd would go wilder and wilder, fueled by the ever-increasing music volume and the electric energy of the place. The pub's beauty would only intensify with time.

And the most exciting thing about the place was that the party didn't have to end anytime soon because this pub would be open until 6 in the morning.

Nitish excitedly said to Kush, "Let's grab Booze!"

Approaching the order station, Nitish signalled for the waiter. He ordered a "German Wheat Beer," eager to make the most of their evening.

Excited to try something new, Kush ordered the "Really Bad Fresh Beer," intrigued by its advertised crisp flavour.

They delightedly surveyed the lively crowd as they settled into their seats with mugs. With matching grins, they raised their glasses in a toast to the evening, shouting, "Cheers!"

After taking a few sips, they placed their glasses on the table and took a moment to observe their surroundings again. They discussed what was happening around them as they took sips.

During their conversation, Kush asked, "I heard you were arguing with your boss this morning."

Nitish hesitated momentarily and said, "Yup, it's a long story. I will share some other day."

"No problem at all," Kush replied.

Once again, the door swung open, "It's Naina,"

She walked in.

Spotting Nitish and Kush, she made her way over and sat beside Nitish. With a broad smile, she greeted both of them warmly.

Kush was delighted to have her join them and extended a hearty welcome. "Thanks for joining us, Naina," he said.

Naina grinned at the warm welcome, her cheeks flushed in the light, and replied, "It's my pleasure, Kush,"

As she settled, she looked around the room. She couldn't help making a sarcastic comment about the monotonous Western songs playing, "Are we in the break-up party?"

"This song is casting a shadow over such a lovely place and creating a monotonous atmosphere."

She pointed the finger at Kush and raised an eyebrow, "Hey, you," she asked. "Have you organised the breakup party? Is this the secret of the evening?"

Kush chuckled heartily and asked, "Naina, where do you get all these ideas?"

"Do you think I'm that stupid?" Kush asked.

Nitish also said, "Listening to this sad Western song gives me the same feeling."

Even though he disliked sad songs, Kush commented that others may have requested a sad song. "Anyway, let's get you a drink," he told Naina.

"Hey, grab your favourite vodka," Nitish added.

But Naina graciously declined the invitation and said sadly, "No, my in-laws are at home."

Nitish responded sarcastically, "Will your in-laws hug you?"

The comment puzzled Naina, and she asked, "What?"

At another moment, she understood and replied, "I feel uncomfortable if I get drunk and go in front of them."

"I apologised for not accompanying you guys with drink today."

"Hey, Naina, why not go for the mocktail instead? I can't imagine an empty glass looking good on someone as fabulous as you," Kush said with a smile.

"I'm okay with the mocktail," Naina grinned and replied. "Order a mocktail for me, Kush."

"Sure," Kush replied, and he motioned for the waiter with his hand.

"Yes, Sir?" The waiter greeted them as he approached, holding a menu.

Kush requested, "A mocktail, please."

The waiter asked for clarification, "Regular (without vodka and other liquors)?"

Kush confirmed, "Yes, regular (no liquor), please."

"Right away, sir," the waiter said, nodding.

The pub door opened abruptly once more, and two people walked in, "It's Aditya and Ankit". They talked and laughed loudly as they made their way to the table where Naina, Kush, and Nitish were already sitting.

After exchanging greetings, Kush asked Aditya, "It's 6:30 p.m. Why are you so delayed?"

Aditya replied, "Whenever I come late in the morning, I compensate for the working hours in the evening."

Kush laughed and said, "Ah, that's the secret of staying late in the office!"

Naina commented sarcastically, "I thought you were waiting for someone in the office."

Aditya chuckled and said, "Yes, great idea, though!"

Kush was now the centre of attention. All eyes stared at him. "So please share the news." They all urged him in unison.

Kush regained his composure after being slightly startled by the sudden attention.

"Let's get Beer for Aditya and Ankit." Kush smiled and spoke.

"Yes, sure, the host." "On your command today. Let's grab Beers." Ankit said in agreement.

Ankit and Aditya approached the order station and sought the waiter's attention, saying, "Excuse me."

"A mug of Really Bad Special Beer, please," Aditya ordered.

"A mug of German Beer, please," Ankit commanded while swaying his legs to the beat of Western music.

"Please give me a moment," the waiter grinned and said.

The waiter reached up and swung the mug from the rack, opened the Fresh Beer tap, and filled it completely.

While the Really Bad Beer was a wheat Beer and had a smooth flavour, the German Beer had a dark colour and a hard flavour.

The waiter topped the mugs with Beer, skimmed off the white foam, and refilled them. Ankit continued to sway his legs on the beat of the music. The waiter served two Beers, one for each customer.

"Here is your Beer, sir! Enjoy!" the waiter exclaimed, enthusiastically handing Aditya the chilled 'Really Bad Special Beer.'

Aditya and Ankit grasped the mugs and returned to the table.

Meanwhile, the waiter served a mocktail at the table, with an enthusiastic voice and smile, "Here is your mocktail, ma'am. Enjoy your drink!"

Kush raised his mug in toast. "Cheers to Good Company and Beer."

The group clinked their mugs together and took a sip.

Ankit took a long sip of his Beer and said, "Ah, this is refreshing."

Nitish nodded, agreeing, "Yes, the Beer here is always good."

Still nursing her mocktail, Naina said, "I feel like I'm missing the booze!"

Everyone continued to chat and enjoy their drinks, with occasional laughter and jokes!

After a few sips, Nitish set his mug down and motioned for the waiter.

A waiter approached the table, and Nitish asked, "Can I have the starter menu, please?"

The waiter said, "Sure, sir." handing over the menu to Nitish.

Nitish quickly scanned the menu and ordered one chilly corn, paneer tikka, and three roasted papads.

The waiter noted the order, read it to check, and walked into the kitchen. He handed the order slip to the head chef, who read it and nodded before getting to work.

Meanwhile, the lively atmosphere of the pub continued to buzz with activity.

The rock music filled the air and pumped up the crowd, making everyone feel energised and lively. The dim lighting inside the pub added to the energetic atmosphere, creating a contagious buzz of excitement.

As the night went on, more people joined in.

The positive energy in the air was contagious. People entered with the groups, making the atmosphere even more lively and welcoming.

Conversations between people emerged amid the boisterous Western music.

Everyone's focus was on Kush once again.

Kush said, "Guys, do you remember the other day when I told you about my crush in college sixteen years ago and subsequently being diagnosed with Cancer?"

"I suffered from the illness and had become bedridden."

Aditya said, "Yes, I remember you telling me you felt like you and she were made for each other."

"And if I recall correctly, you never felt that way about anyone else, right?"

Kush grinned and said, "Yes, you're right, Aditya."

Aditya recalled the previous exchange, "You further stated that you both had a similar opinion on almost all the subjects, be they social, local, national, or international issues."

"But you told me you never spoke to her in the last ten years." Naina cut in and stated. She was getting a little irritated by Western music.

"Yes, I was diagnosed with cancer at 21, and I met her last in Pune sixteen years ago," Kush said.

"I was under treatment for three continuous years under my siblings' and mother's supervision, and during same time, we lost touch."

"After I overcame my illness, I went to her house, but she had moved to another city to pursue studies, and she didn't have a cell phone because it wasn't so common then."

"After that, I never tried to reach out to her because I thought she wouldn't be interested in me anymore since I had undergone extensive treatment."

"Yet, I remembered her every day, scrolling through my gallery to see the time we spent together whenever I had the chance. I longed for the day we would reunite so I could tell her everything."

Nitish interrupted, saying, "Yes, we were always surprised by what you see on your phone."

Kush said, "Okay." He laughed and continued, a few days ago, something amazing happened. I received a friend request from Priya - my crush from the good ol' Orkut days. I couldn't believe it! And without a second thought, I clicked "accept".

"I used to spend hours staring at her picture on my phone, daydreaming about meeting her again. And now, it felt like the universe had finally brought us back together."

"She called me, and I shared with her my assumptions and reasons for not reaching out to her. She heard everything patiently, and the next moment she yelled at me.

Priya continued yelling, sobbing, and repeatedly asking, "How dare you think I'll forget you?"

"She asked me many times, 'Why did you not reach out to me?'"

After repeatedly telling her what I assumed, she cried too much.

"I told her many times during our talk that I had gone through cancer treatment and had an assumption that you would have moved on."

"So, I never tried to reach you."

"Hearing me, she sobbed and said, 'You are too Stupid, Man!'"

"Later, we met in-person, and our sixteen-year-old love rekindled."

"She was my friend when I was a healthy young man."

"Now she knows my health issue, yet she said, 'I just want you. I don't know the world. I will make everyone convinced, but I just want you.'"

"Wow! Hero!" Naina chuckled and commented.

"This is the girl I saw every day in my phone gallery," Kush said.

Aditya said, "Good man," grinning widely.

They clinched the mugs, shouting this time, "Cheers!"

The waiter arrived at Nitish's table and delivered the ordered snack—roasted papad, paneer tikka, and chilli corn.

He put dishes with a spoon and fork in front of each person.

"May I serve you?" the waiter asked.

Nitish said, "Yes, serve us, please."

Kush paused momentarily, sipped his drink, and continued, "I had a deep-seated belief that if we were destined, we would meet again."

"I didn't know when, where, why, or how. But I had an intuition that I would meet her again. My mind circled back to one girl, Priya."

"Don't you think it's a little filmy, Kush?" Naina commented sarcastically.

"My life is full of such scenes." Kush cheerfully replied.

"First at the time of birth, then a happy love life was spoiled when I was detected with cancer, and then I met Priya when there was a bleak chance for it."

"I proposed to her with a word I have never said to anyone, and she repeated the same."

"Oh! Yes!" echoed in the excitement of everyone.

"Cheers to Kush and Priya!" Naina raised her glass again, toasting to love, and the others followed suit.

Everyone echoed while standing up and holding a mug.

There was an intense buzz of activity in the pub now. People were chatting and laughing everywhere. The video wall was playing Western pop songs now.

The music was getting louder as night approached. People enjoyed the company of one another along with the music by this time.

Everyone refilled their mugs once more. All were cheerful.

Naina called the waiter, gesturing with her hand, because she was fed up with Hollywood songs & music.

The waiter approached her and asked, "Yes, Ma'am."

She asked, "Excuse me, can you please change the music to Punjabi Songs or Bollywood songs?"

"We cannot play Hindi and Punjabi songs before 10 p.m., " the waiter replied with a sad face.

"Can you please check with the manager? They won't mind playing one or two songs between the Western ones.", Naina reiterated.

The waiter nodded and went over to the manager's desk and talked to him.

After a brief wait, a loud video song started, "Mere Dil Naal Laare Ni Tu Laun Waliye....."

(Credit: A.P. Dhillon; Credit: Song title: Excuse.)

The entire pub was filled with shouts and energy. Naina got up from the seat, shaking her feet; Ankit Kush also followed her, while Nitish and Aditya were seated.

The crowd from the pub came to the DJ floor. The energy in the pub skyrocketed with the loud music and shouts of excitement.

The manager had allowed playing one or two songs in the middle of Western music, not continuously. Hence, after two minutes, the Western songs started again, and everyone sat back in their seats.

Sadly, the crowd becomes monotonous again.

A beep sounded on the cell phone, "Beep, Beep, Beep, Beep....."

Aditya checked the reminder and said, "It is time to leave for home."

He said, "Thanks, Kush. My best wishes for a happy time ahead."

Kush replied, "It is my pleasure, Aditya."

They all bade Aditya farewell, saying, "Goodbyes; see you."

While the party continued with Kush, Naina, Ankit, and Nitish.

The rounds of filling the glasses and mugs continued, with the music in the pub getting louder and louder as the night approached.

The seats and tables in the pub were filled completely, with only a few seats left.

Everyone was engrossed in chatting with others. At the same time, the music grew louder as the pub played English pop and rap on the giant video wall.

The crowd went crazy as soon as the Hindi song played, and once again, people shouted in excitement, "O, O, O..."

Almost everyone left their seats as soon as the Hindi and Punjabi songs started playing amid Western songs. But as soon as the music switched to Hollywood, people were back in their seats, except for some who continued dancing.

By now, some people could dance to the tune of the generators even as they were down after a few pegs, so Hollywood songs were much better for them. Others

preferred the fast-paced Hollywood songs and remained on the dance floor, shaking their feet.

Just then, the DJ changed the beat again, and lights flashed rapidly, synchronised with the music; flickering colourful lights all over the dance floor. The fog machine was in full gear, adding to the effect. About twenty people were now dancing to the continuous Hindi and Punjabi songs.

Suddenly, the crowd went wild to the evergreen Bollywood song.

"*Dum Maro Dum, Mit Jaye Gum....."

The crowd's excitement rose as the following line played, with loud hooting and laughter filling the air.

The song continued to the next line, "Dunia Ne Humko Diya Kya?....."

Then, the music was muted.

The crowd shouted with full energy, "GHANTAAA....." The music resumed and continued to the following line, "Duniya Ne Humse Liya Kya?....." The DJ muted the audio again.

And the crowd echoed the chant even louder, joining their palms at one end, opening them at the other, and placing them over their mouths, "GHANTAAAAA....."

*"*Songs credit: Dum Maro Dum, an Indian Bollywood song, from the movie "Hare Rama Hare Krishna." Credit Singer:*

Asha Bhosle; Credit writer: Anand Bakshi; Credit composer: Rahul dev burman."

Each face beamed with happiness! The pub had an extremely lively moment!

Everyone laughed and enjoyed themselves to the fullest!

The DJ switched the song.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to make people sit in their places after a few drinks and playing crazy Punjabi and Hindi songs.

Just then, Naina's phone rang, and she answered in a low tone, "Hi, yes, yes, coming out. Please wait a while."

It was her husband.

Naina said, "Thanks for Party Kush, "Enjoy. My best wishes to both of you."

"I need to leave now." See you tomorrow."

After Naina left, Nitish, Kush, and Ankit remained seated while shaking their feet.

They approached the order counter, requested their mugs be filled, and returned to their seats. Later, Kush ordered some more snacks, and they enjoyed their drinks as the music grew louder and louder.

At 10 p.m., the pub turned to continuous Bollywood and Punjabi music. Kush checked the time, excitedly saying to

Ankit, "Yes, it's time now!" Their legs trembled as they got into the spirit of the music and drinks.

Ankit showed thumbs to Kush after some beauties on the floor joined from the adjacent seat, saying, "Hey, let's go for a dance."

Kush said with a thrilled voice in his ear, "Yes, let's give company. It's a good social service, Ankit. Let's go."

They joined on the floor.

Neither Ankit nor Kush danced, but they trembled well at the music and continued the dance with other beauties from the floor. The floor was full of people making noises out of excitement in no time.

After some time, Ankit showed his hands towards Kush's seat and said, "Let's return to the seat."

After their last sip, Ankit gestured with his thumbs towards the exit, showing they should leave.

Kush nodded in agreement and waved his hand at the waiter. The waiter approached the table, and Kush made a pen-holding gesture with his hand and mouthed the word "bill" to request the bill.

The next moment, they settled the bill, and they both left the pub "Really Bad."

CHAPTER -X

The cool breeze and clear sky energised everyone at the grand ceremonial Parade ground. It looked beautiful, with a decorated dais and a large grandstand area that could accommodate over 500 people. The parade route was also well-decorated and looked grand.

The entire ground was filled with a beautiful fragrance of marigold, jasmine, and rose flowers that were used for decoration.

It was time for celebration at the SVP National Police Academy in Hyderabad, India!

The floral decor added to the solemnity of the grand event of the day - the Dikshant Ceremony for the IPS (Indian Police Service). It was a ceremony held to mark the completion of phase-1 training for trainee IPS Officers (RR). It would be followed by the Dikshant Parade.

The grandstand had a maroon carpet on the floor and regular chairs covered in white, which made it a pleasant and formal place to watch the Dikshant Parade. They also had tower air conditioners in the area. The grandstand looked great, with a white canopy over the seating area. The entire marching route was visible from here.

Small speakers were placed all over the ground to ensure the best sound quality.

All participants and visitors were excited about the grand celebration!

It was all set for the day.

As the loud Police band played at the Base of the parade ground, everyone erupted with joy and excitement.

Towards the Base of the Parade ground, the National Tricolor Flags and the Unit Flag waved ecstatically. The Young Officers in uniform prepared for a Battalion. There were fifteen battalions, and each one would follow their Squadron, led by the First Officer of the column.

The Commanding Officer would lead the entire Parade and would be awarded the "Sword of Honor" for being the best in Phase 1 of the training.

The dais was filled with dignitaries, including the Director of the National Police Academy, Chief Guests, and Special Invitees.

Also, the seats in the grandstand were filling up fast, and the crowd got bigger every minute.

The Band's rehearsal ended, and they played a different tune customarily; it was heard throughout the Parade ground.

Towards the grandstand area, the families of the Young Officers were filled with pride, anticipating seeing their sons and daughters march proudly for this momentous occasion.

Each parent and visitor tried to locate their young Officer in the Battalion while sitting on the grandstand. When they found them, they were overjoyed. The moments of glancing and getting filled with joy and pride were extraordinary.

The battalion formation finished, and the Band played a louder version of the song.

Cheers and applause erupted from the crowd, finally seeing their sons and daughters all dressed up and ready to take their oaths as Officers and join the duties as an ASP (Assistant Superintendent of Police) brought a beam of pride to parents' faces.

Soon, the parade ground throbbed with the sound of boots thundering on the ground as the Commanding Officer took his position.

Just then, the grandstand bustled with activity and excitement once more as the Honourable Union Minister of Home Affairs as the Chief Guest, the Director of the Police

Academy, and Decorated and Retired Officers joined on the dais.

From the Base of the Parade ground, a young and charismatic Police Officer dressed in khaki shirts, pants, and tan shoes, with the initials 'IPS' embossed on his belt, stood behind the Squadron, searching for someone as he continuously gazed towards the grandstand. The Officer also wore a parrot-style cap, a three-star stud on his shoulder, and a colourful ribbon taped across his left chest. He also had a shoulder-to-waist arm belt and a pistol pouch fastened to the left side of his waist. Though he was only 5 feet 8 inches tall, his cap made him look taller.

He was ready to lead his Troop in the march.

On the other hand, an Old Man in his sixties sat quietly in the grandstand. He eagerly waited for the Young Officer to march by. He had silky, evenly parted white hair, coloured and styled to make him look younger. He was well-groomed and wore David's perfume, a sky-blue shirt, black chinos, and a belt.

The Old Man remembered the Young Officer's entire childhood as if his entire childhood were passing at this moment.

The Young Officer gazed from one end of grandstand to other, trying to spot the Old Man. He behaved the same as when he was a kid. He made funny faces as he searched in vain for this man.

As the Old Man waited for the Young Man, memories flooded his mind. He remembered when the young Officer was just in fourth grade, he learned to dance for the school's annual day. Although the boy didn't like dancing, he did it to make the old man happy.

He expected the Young Man would scold him for not sitting in the front row like he did in his childhood. *"Hey, why didn't you sit in the front row?"* he used to ask repeatedly. And today, the Old Man expected nothing less.

Now, the elderly man was eagerly waiting to catch the Young Man's eye and touch him as he marched by. Despite the joy of such a proud moment, his whole body trembled with excitement. He grew restless to see him.

Just now, on the podium, an energetic young host took charge to kick off the ceremony. While more decorated Officers joined from all sides of the grandstand.

"Good morning, and welcome everyone to the Dikshant Ceremony (RR) for the 91st Batch of Indian Police Service." An announcement by the host in a crisp voice drew everyone's attention.

And she muted the microphone.

As the ceremony began, there was suddenly a lot of commotion in the media area. Cameramen set up their equipment, including tripods and camera lifts, which could

hover and autofocus on the entire parade ground. They adjusted the focus and were all set to capture the action.

The host raised the microphone, placed the earpiece, and announced, *"It's time to begin."* *"I request everyone to settle in quickly,"* And she muted the microphone again.

The Hon'ble Union Minister of Home Affairs of the Republic of India had already arrived and was ready to preside over the ceremony, and he, along with other esteemed dignitaries, guests, and the Director of the academy, had already sat on the dais following tradition.

The dais had six steps and was two feet above the ground in height. It had staircases on both sides.

The marching troops would parade along their route and would stop at the dais, which was a saluting base too. The Parade would receive awards and trophies in front of the saluting Base.

A promotional video by the Government titled *"Vision Video of Developed India 2040"* played on a massive LED screen measuring 180'x120' onstage. The video outlined India's current position and what it needed to do to progress by 2050.

The screen also displayed the program's name, *"Welcome to the Oath Ceremony for the 91st Batch of Indian Police Service Officer,"* with a decorated Police Officer's silhouette in the background and large font text superimposed on top.

The stage had two podiums at opposite ends. One podium was reserved for the host, and another for the chief guests and distinguished guests.

The host made herself aware of the agenda and entire schedule of events and continued, **"A hero is someone who has given their life to something bigger than themselves. Today, our entire hall is full of such heroes, dignitaries, and a Chief Guest."**

Citation from Joseph Campbell

It was audible throughout the parade grounds; the crowd erupted in applause.

"Good morning, and welcome," the host continued. "Everyone in the 91st IPS batch has eagerly awaited this day." "And finally, it has come!"

The host smiled and remained silent as the audience cheered and applauded again.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the Hon'ble Union Minister of Home Affairs of the Republic of India is among us now to grace today's ceremony," the host announced energetically after a brief pause.

"This is a historic day." The host continued, "The Phase 1 all-round winner of the 91st batch of RR will lead the Ceremonial Parade as a Commanding Officer."

The host then requested the Hon'ble Minister for the opening of the ceremony, and said, *"May I invite the Hon'ble Minister to join us on the dais and lead us to the Lamp-Lighting Ceremony?"*

The Hon'ble Minister moved towards the lamp from the left side of the dais.

The host then requested, *"May I request the Distinguished Dignitaries, and Director of the Academy, to accompany the Hon'ble minister?"*

The Chief Guest and the other Dignitaries approached the lamp. They all took part in the traditional Lighting of the Lamp Ceremony.

The Ceremonial Lamp-Lighting Ceremony met with a deafening roar of applause.

Once everyone sat down in their designated places, the host expressed gratitude to the Hon'ble Minister, saying, *"Sir, thank you very much for enhancing the grace of the event with your presence and Lighting the Lamp; with your permission, we mark the event as ongoing."*

Then, the host thanked the guests again.

Next, the host invited the Chief Guest, saying, *"May I invite the Hon'ble Chief Guest to honour the event's proceedings with your keynote?"*

The Chief Guest arose from the dais, bowed his head slightly as a sign of acceptance of grace, and walked to the podium.

The Chief Guest began his address by saying, *"Good morning to each of the young IPS Officers of batch 91st, distinguished guests and invitees of the ceremony. We are proud to have the next generation of Officers ready to take oaths for their duties as ASP, and....."*

The Chief Guest continued, *"I am privileged to present a 'Sword of Honour' to the Commander of the Troop, who is an all-round topper in Phase 1 of training. He would command the Parade of the 91st batch."*

The Commanding Officer marched towards the dais.

The Hon'ble Minister handed over the 'Sword of Honour' to the Commanding Officer.

The Officer raised the sword, kissed its hand, and pointed it to the ground, which signifies, *"The Sword of Honour will be at your command, Hon'ble Chief of the Unit, on behalf of the President of India."*

The host requested, *"May I now request the Hon'ble Minister to inspect the troop?"*

The crowd's thunderous cheers reverberated throughout the Parade Ground.

The Minister along with the Director of the Academy, and the Commanding Officer walked towards the Battalion, where the Officer took his place in the centre.

Next moment, at the command of the Commanding Officer, the Battalion saluted in unison, and at the same time, the Commanding Officer raised the sword and pointed toward the ground with full force once more.

The Hon'ble Minister observed the passing out Parade with delight and gratitude for every Officer of the Battalion.

And then the chief guest took the Salute for the Parade, and later he shook hands with the Commanding Officer and signalled the Parade to march.

Followed with it, the Band's tune increased and played the adjutant's call.

The Director of the Academy and the Hon'ble Minister returned to the dais.

And the Troop marched along with the full Band.

The Parade was to march through a rectangular route that was to be passed through the grandstand. And finally, it was to halt in front of the dais.

Seeing the Parade marched, the Old Man trembled with delight as he finally found the young man leading his Battalion as the First Officer.

He closed his eyes out of happiness and to pray. His heart raced because of the excitement. He felt someone touch him on the head and face while his eyes were closed. He kept his eyes closed and was not willing to open them.

The Parade, with full Band music, marched.

As the marching Troops reached in front of the grandstand, everyone in the grandstand joined to make a roaring noise and applaud in unison. It was the most exciting moment for everyone on the Parade Ground!

The Old Man opened his eyes and saw the Young Man marching proudly as it passed through the spectators' area. The Young Man's cap was serving as a crown over his head, his shoulders were straight and broad, and his cheeks formed a dimple. The entire Troop was completely transformed, with a sense of pride in themselves, the utmost confidence, and agility.

Throughout the entire time, the audience enthusiastically applauded.

The Parade marched ahead and halted in front of the dais for the oath-taking ceremony.

The host said, *"The Commanding Officer shall take an oath by repeating the statement stated by the Hon'ble Minister, holding a 'Sword of Honour' as a symbol of honour for the entire unit, while the entire Troop will raise their hand and point their palm towards the ground."*

"And they all shall repeat the following oath, "I, _____, having been appointed as "Assistant Superintendent of Police," swear / solemnly affirm that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India...., that I will uphold the Constitution of India as by law established...."

Reference: Section 5 of the Constitution (Sixteenth Amendment) Act, 1963, for Form VII. 2, Ins. by Section 5 of the Same Act; Reference: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/S3.pdf>.

The Parade Ground shook from the reverberation of the ensuing claps.

And the Oath Ceremony started with the Commanding Officer coming forward and pointing his sword at the ground while the entire Troop raised their hands towards the ground and repeated the whole oath. The Band played a beautiful tune, and everyone clapped.

The entire parade ground was audibly rumbling at this moment.

After the ceremony, the Troop marched to the Base while the host requested, *"May I invite the Chief Guest- Hon'ble Minister, to deliver remarks!"*

The Hon'ble Minister walked towards his left at the podium, and the entire area again applauded. The marching Troops reached the Base.

The Hon'ble Minister started delivering the closing keynotes,
"We....."

The Troop dispersed customarily on arrival at the Base.

Each Officer shook hands, Congratulating the other, while one Young Officer ran towards the grandstand immediately after dispersal.

As the Old Man saw the Young Man running towards the grandstand, he got up from his seat and walked over to the ground.

The Young Man had a lovely smile. He was so attractive that the Old Man forgot about anything after seeing him. Seeing the Young Man in uniform, the Old Man was totally captivated.

As soon as the Old Man met the Young Man, his face lit up with joy. He couldn't help but plant a big, sloppy kiss on the young man's cheek. The Young Man was three inches taller and wearing a cap. He gripped the Young Man tightly and refused to leave him. He felt so proud of Young Man.

As he hugged the Young Man, the Old Man felt someone nearby. He sensed someone was patting him on the back. Although he couldn't see it. He felt a strong touch, as if somebody was physically there. He even felt someone holding his hand as he touched the young man.

An invisible presence rubbed his back and patted him repeatedly as if to say, *"He has made it, Aditya!"*

The Old Man was overwhelmed with emotions.

"Thanks for accompanying me so far. I knew you'd be happy today." He murmured as he turned to look behind him.

As the young man saw the Old Man murmuring, he became curious. He interrupted by asking, *"Daddy, who are you looking at?"*

Aditya suddenly woke up from a deep slumber, breaking the chain of his dreams. He looked around the room, put his hand on his head, and whispered, *"Wow, what a wonderful dream!"*
"May it come true!"

The room was cosy, with a temperature of 22 degrees Celsius. The brown blanket, blue sheet, and white pillow made for a pleasant night's sleep and an unforgettable dream.

Next to him, his nine-year-old son, Aarav, was sleeping soundly and taking deep breaths. His neat black hair, innocent face, and two front teeth were bigger than the rest of his teeth, making him look adorable. Aditya kissed him and ran his fingers through his hair and forehead.

Trying to relive the dream, Aditya laid on the bed, closed his eyes, and took deep breaths to fall back asleep.

An hour passed, and he was still trying to concentrate on his breath to doze off. Suddenly, he heard his phone's alarm and reached out to grab it. It was 6 a.m., and his phone sounded the alarm to wake him.

He snoozed the alarm and snuggled back under the blanket with Aarav.

He whispered to Aarav, "Son, put your hand over me, and hold me tight!"

"EVERYONE BORN on Earth has a unique life journey. Every journey is unique and full of challenges, triumphs, love, and loss.

It's a journey that never ends. Those we've lost will never truly be gone from this world; their actions and legacies will remain in the minds and hearts of the people they touched in their lives.

The impact and significance of life are determined not only by individual experiences during one's time lived but also by how they touched and influenced different lives, sometimes through their children, sometimes through people one met on this journey, through the relationships one forged, through the friends one made, and through the bonds one shared and legacies they've left behind, they can't be erased, destroyed, or lost forever.

Our journey through life leaves an indelible mark on the world.

So, let us embrace our unique life journeys, learn from the challenges and triumphs, cherish the love and memories, and strive to make it an indelible journey."



INDELIBLE *Journey*

"LIFE IS A PLEASANT VOYAGE UNTIL IT RUNS
INTO A TYPHOON, THEN..."

"This book is more than a story. It's a journey of human experiences that is full of heart-melting incidents. It's a true reflection of modern life in the current world."

Nitin Sangwan, IAS

"Indelible Journey is a glimpse of real life, which remains always unpredictable whatsoever we may plan and dream of, and it takes its own route, breaking or making people in its course. The journey made through this life remains Indelible forever."

**Bipin Menon, ITS, Development Commissioner,
Noida SEZ**

"All the characters relate to and represent a large portion of the society, and anyone reading this book will be able to relate to the people around them. Through the story, readers can take away valuable lessons about life, such as the importance of resilience, courage, and determination in overcoming hardships."

Piyush Rohankar, DANCIS, Asst. Commissioner (Excise), Delhi

"Indelible Journey" is a work of fiction inspired by real-life events; it's a true reflection of the contemporary world and the unpredictable life around us, giving us a bumpy ride and sometimes a pleasant life. It also reflects the consequences of our choices and how life turns out as a result.

Dr. Shikha Joshi, MBBS, MD



Ashish, a passionate about storytelling and rivals even the most celebrated scribes. While his days are devoted as a marketing professional for an MNC, his weekends and holidays are dedicated to writing. With an MBA from the University of Lucknow and an Executive MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Kolkata, the author has mastered the art of captivating minds through stories. His seventeen years of experience with various companies and exposure to the global realities has influenced his storytelling uniquely, infusing his narratives with a captivating blend of intrigue, emotion, practicality.

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